



THE HIDDEN DUNGEON

ONLY I CAN
ENTER

NOVEL

2

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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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A full-page illustration of a young woman with short, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a red and white sleeveless top with gold trim and a dark red skirt. A large, dark brown hand is visible at the top left, resting on her head. Two blue, flame-like symbols with white swirls are floating in the air. The background is dark and indistinct.

“Ahh...you’re right...I
do feel a little happier.
Ahh, but it won’t last
for the rest of my life,
so I really should just
die after all.”

“Ngh, how is it
so powerful?!”



EMMA BRIGHTNESS





Her long, beautiful hair
spilled out from behind
her neck. Her face was
still red, but her eyes
were serious.

"I don't normally do
things like this."

LUNAHEELA

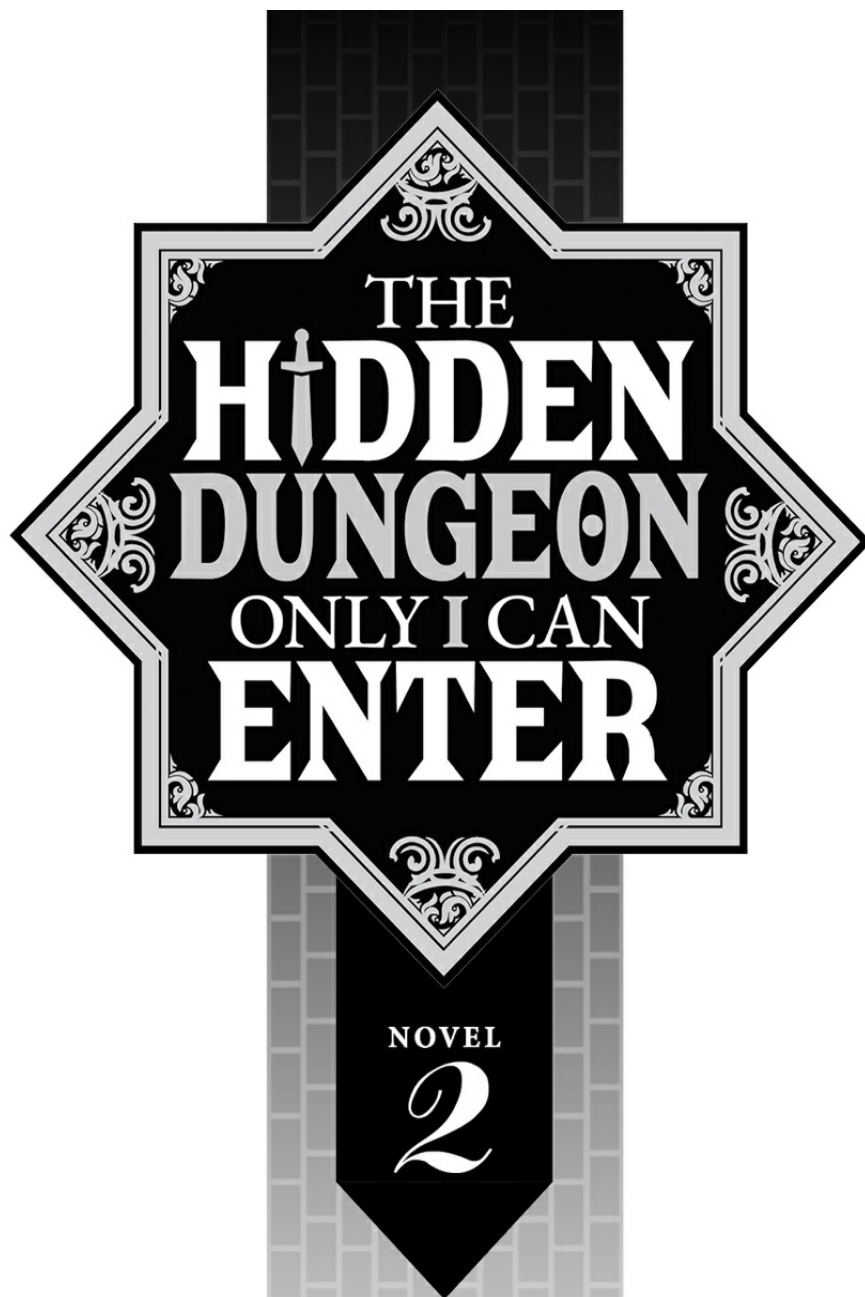
NOIRSTARDIA

A full-page illustration of a young woman with long black hair and blue eyes, wearing a pink nightgown with white cuffs and collar. She is sitting on a dark wooden bed frame, looking slightly to the side with a gentle smile. A teddy bear is visible on the bed behind her. The background is a simple room with wooden walls and a window.

ALICE STARDIA

“You couldn’t ask
anyone else, could you?
This is our little secret.”

“I can’t believe
you’re enjoying your
little sister stepping
all over you...”



NOVEL

2

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ILLUSTRATED BY

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by Takehana Note

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Chapter 1:

Payday!

ALL HER LIFE, Maria had been afflicted with the terrible Sixteenth Year Death Curse, but with our help, she was saved.

In the week after, I fell into a more or less comfortable rhythm as a student and part-time adventurer. One day, my new party and I headed out to eradicate a monster, specifically a lizardman.

We stared the creature down in the middle of a grassy plain. My childhood friend Emma readied her daggers. “I’m gonna head in. Back me up, guys.”

“We’ve got you.”

“Yeah!”

There was only one lizardman, but we couldn’t let our guard down. If nothing else, the thing was *big*. Normal lizardmen were human-sized, but this guy was a ten-foot-tall mutant with green sandpapery skin and limbs like logs.

Name: Lizardman

Level: 31

Skills: Beefy; Slash Resistance (Grade C); Tough Skin

It had high defense, but as a result, it was slow. Emma accounted for this deficiency and darted behind it. In two quick slashes, she hit the creature with her signature dual daggers.

“Huh...?”

Her attack seemed to glance right off the lizardman. To make matters worse, her weapons were damaged in the attempt. She had the creature’s C-Grade Slash Resistance to thank for that.

The shock made Emma drop her guard for a split second. The lizardman took advantage of her falter and flung its massive arm in her direction.

Luna, our cleric, didn't miss a beat. She readied her magic gun and fired three times in rapid succession. An enchanted orange light burst from the muzzle and dug a line of tiny holes down the creature's shoulder. The second Luna was finished, the lizardman's arm plopped to the ground. It was seriously impressive.

"Ugh..." Luna muttered.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I just feel a little dizzy," said Luna. "Sorry, could you handle the rest?"

"You bet."

Magical Fusion would do the trick. With that skill, I combined Holy Flame and Stone Bullet and fired my new spell straight at the creature's heart.

"Ugh—!"

I missed a killing blow, but the projectile tore off the lizardman's remaining arm. Could've been worse.

"I'll handle it!" Emma might have lost her weapons, but she still had her Wind Strike spell. She blasted it into the lizardman's stomach, but the creature just flashed a smirk.

Emma gaped. "But how..."

"Emma, get away from that thing!" I grabbed my sword and threw myself forward.

No matter how high the lizardman's defenses were, my sword had the skill Sharp Edge. However, midway through my dashing leap, I tripped. The culprit looked like some kind of crap. Aughhh, gross, gross, gross!

Just then a sharp kick flew over my head. It would have crushed my bones if I hadn't fallen. That Good Luck skill sure was handy.

Regardless, I scrambled up and lunged, stabbing the lizardman in the heart. A narrow victory for sure.

"Heh, I can't even joke about how you really stepped in it," Emma snickered.

"Hey, I mighta lost my head if I hadn't!" I protested.

“Ah, yeah, I guess so...” She sighed. “I ended up being pretty much useless, huh? Sorry about that.”

“When you get new weapons, you should get some with the Sharp Edge skill. I’ll help you look.”

“Aw, thanks.”

Luna regained her balance and came over. I was relieved to see that she was feeling better.

“I have never seen a spell quite like the one you just cast, Sir Noir,” she said.

“Enh, I just used Magical Fusion to combine Holy Flame and Stone Bullet.”

“You really can do anything, huh...? I think I’m jealous.”

“No, no, it’s nothing,” I insisted. “Okay, we should probably head back.”

The three of us worked together to butcher the creature’s remains.

20× Lizardman Nails (Grade C)

2× Lizardman Arms (Grade C)

2× Lizardman Legs (Grade C)

2× Lizardman Testes (Grade C)

I tucked them away into my Pocket Dimension. We only needed the arms to complete this guild-assigned mission, anyway. We could figure out what to do with the rest later.

Once we were back at the guild hall, we showed Lola the proof of our conquest.

“Was it really *that* big?!” she exclaimed.

“Yup. Over ten feet tall,” I said.

“Wow...and who delivered the finishing blow?”

“Technically, I did, but it was really more of a fluke.”

“Why am I not surprised? This goes to you then, Mr. Noir.” Lola handed me a slip of paper. The phrase “Coupon for a thirty-minute Shoulder Rub from Lola” was written on it in her adorable handwriting.

Ha! This really takes me back. I’m pretty sure I gave my parents one of these when I was a kid.

“Hee hee, were you hoping for something else?” Lola asked. “You’re going to have to work harder for that.”

“Oh, no,” said Luna. “This is about exactly what I’ve come to expect from you, Lola.”

“Please! I’m an egalitarian.”

“Really now? Then where are my and Lady Emma’s rewards?”

“You don’t get any.”

“Egalitarian my butt.”

Whatever the others said, I was pretty happy with this coupon. I was definitely going to cash in on it someday.

Not soon, though—I realized how late it was the second we left the guild hall. I was supposed to meet the duke.

“I’m sorry, Emma!” I apologized. “I’ll have to help you find new daggers another time.”

“No problem!” she said. “You two better not mess anything up, okay?”

“I’ll try my best.”

Luna and I left Emma and headed across town at a clip to Maria’s house. When we knocked on the door of the Albert family estate, Maria dashed to the door.

“Haaah, haaah, welcome! Please, do come in!”

“Lady Maria, did you really run out just to greet us?”

“I was, just, so looking, forward, to seeing you two!”

“Us ‘two’?” Luna asked as she shot me a meaningful glance. “Is that so...?”

Whatever the case, Maria led us into her home. Maids and butlers lined the walls of the reception room, and Duke Albert stood from a grand chair to greet us. “It gladdens me to see you both. Please, take a seat.”

A butler brought out some fancy-looking tea. When I took a sip, my suspicions were confirmed—it tasted as delicious as it appeared. It might well have been the most expensive thing I’d ever put in my mouth.

“It is my wish to once more thank you for lifting Maria’s curse,” said the duke. “We were at a complete loss for what to do. If you had not entered our lives, our family’s future would have been grim indeed.”

“Has Maria’s condition dipped since the removal?”

“Not a bit. In fact, it has become difficult to believe she was ever so afflicted. Thanks to your efforts, she has many bright days ahead.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said.

“As they say, you cannot put a price on good health.”

As Luna and I relaxed with relief, the duke snapped his fingers. Two maids appeared and set a hefty pair of leather bags down in front of each of us.

“Open them,” the duke insisted.

“Huh?”

We did as he asked and what do you think we found? Money. *Money*-money. Like, the bags were jam-packed with brilliant, gleaming coins kind of money.

“Wh-wh-what?” I stammered.

“Think of it as payment. Although, it’s hardly enough.”

Hardly enough? There had to be ten—no, twenty million rels in there!

“Within, you should find a hundred million rels each. Please, take it.”

“This is really too...”

“Not another word. I desire for us to have a long and fruitful relationship. If you are ever in need of anything whatsoever, you need only ask.”

I had never seen so much money in my life. From that point forward,

everything else the duke said just went in one ear and out the other. A strangely sensation overcame my body, and I didn't snap out of my daze until it was time to leave. I took care not to drop the bag on my way out.

"I'm sure you will be able to handle yourself, Mr. Noir, but do take care to look out for robbers," Maria said.

Hit with the sudden dreadful realization that the world was full of potential enemies, Luna and I watched each other's backs as we walked home, clutching our bags.

"I still can't really believe he gave us all this," I said. "I would never have guessed..."

"Y-yes, but I can't really complain," said Luna. "After I lifted the curse last week, all my savings suddenly disappeared. I was utterly broke."

"I wish you'd said something. Though, I guess it's really my fault for forgetting about that side-effect." In order to let Luna use her skill to cure Maria, I'd had to do a little tweaking to keep her from dying herself. "Sorry."

"Don't worry at all. Especially not now!" Luna cheerfully hugged her bag.

"Good point! No need to worry when you're carrying that kind of weight."

"The weight of happiness!"

"You said it!"

We were in high spirits when we parted. I was less than a ten-minute walk from home, but without Luna to guard my blind spot, I started to feel vulnerable—like everyone who passed had their eyes on my bag. I tried to act nonchalant to avoid any unwanted attention and kept my guard up the whole way back.

About ten yards from the Stardia estate, it suddenly hit me: I could have just hucked my loot into my Pocket Dimension!

"Oh my god, I'm such an idiot!"

I guess it's true that money does strange things to people.



Chapter 2:

The Tulip Lion Appears!

MY FATHER, MOTHER, AND SISTER were all stunned by my new heap of money. After a family meeting, we decided that I would use my Pocket Dimension skill to hang on to it for now. I wasn't sure what to do with it all. Putting it into savings seemed like the obvious option, but when I consulted with Emma the following morning, she gave me a surprising answer.

"Well, why don't you use it as capital to grow your investment?"

"Like how?"

"What about opening a monster material store?"

Huh. That sounded like a pretty darn decent idea. The hidden dungeon was chock full of rare monsters, after all. Although, I'd be in a bit of a pickle if some bigshot asked me where I sourced my stock.

"Or what about a second-hand shop?" I asked.

"Oh yeah! You can always buy up stuff cheap and resell it for a profit."

Also, seeing as I could add skills to weapons, I could buy low-end swords and sell them at a much higher price. Granted, that would require a steady influx of LP, too.

"I'll do whatever I can to help," Emma declared. "I think it'd be fun to run a shop together."

"Wait, aren't you jumping the gun a little here?"

"Mmm, am I? Weren't we always talking about running a shop when we were little? I think it'd be a nice life."

If I had Emma's help... This really wasn't a terrible idea. I spent the school day preoccupied with thoughts of how I'd go about getting a store off the ground, and if I'd even have the time. I still owed Lola for her help when I got started at the guild—which I'd needed to do to enroll at the academy—and I wanted to

keep working as an adventurer. I wanted to keep exploring the hidden dungeon, too—it was hard to resist the siren song of all those rare materials and items.

Come to think of it, I hadn't spoken to my master in a while, and I still hadn't finished the fifth floor of the hidden dungeon. I wondered if that black lion with the tulip growing out of its head was still hanging around down there. Once I remembered it, I couldn't get it out of my mind. As soon as classes were over, I headed straight for the dungeon.

"Hidden dungeon only I can enter—let me train in secret to become the strongest in the world!"

As I spoke the password, the entrance rumbled open. No matter how many times I'd said it, it was still fairly embarrassing. In any case, it really had been a while since I'd last been to the dungeon. I wondered if my master was lonely.

I was a little hungry, so I started my visit by hunting down a golden slime on the first floor. But as I turned the corner without a care in the world, a chill shot up my spine.

"That seems a little...big."

Was that *really* a golden slime? It was, uh, pretty, you know, freaking huge. So huge, in fact, that it was touching the walls and ceiling. Maybe it was the golden slime boss or something? Maybe it would make that cute sound all the other golden slimes made when they spat out golden flu— "Blerrrrgh!"

"There's nothing remotely cute about that!"

It spewed a river of dark green fluid at me, and I ran as fast as I could. The amount of toxic liquid was nothing to laugh at—it splashed all over the floor. Thankfully, I somehow avoided getting hit.

I put some distance between myself and the creature as it slithered across the floor, coming straight at me. It was, to say the least, terrifying. I frantically deployed my Discerning Eye.

Name: Golden Slime

Level: 138

Skills: Putrid Bile; Combine; Separate

It was a super high level! At first I thought it was a mutant or something, but then it hit me—its size probably had something to do with that unusual Combine skill.

I didn't have much time to think it out, so I focused on attacking. If things got too dicey, I would retreat and use my Dungeon Elevator skill to jump to the second floor. Once I'd gained enough distance, I fired off a one-foot-diameter Stone Bullet.

"Blerrrrgh!"

That just pissed it off. Its body was elastic, so it looked like stone projectiles probably wouldn't have much effect.

"How about this then?"

I combined another Stone Bullet with Holy Flame. I crossed my fingers that it would work better, as slimes tended to be weak to fire.

Splat!

A wet noise echoed through the passage as the flaming projectile missed spectacularly. I know what you're thinking: "But how could you miss such an ungodly huge monster, Noir, you dunce?" In my defense, the giant creature chose that moment to split into five smaller slimes.

Now there were five considerably more normal-sized slimes in the corridor. When I assessed them with my Discerning Eye, they were Levels 24, 22, 28, 23, and 41, which all added up to, you guessed it, 138.

From the looks of it, only the Level 41 slime had the Combine and Separate skills. It was also the strongest, so altogether it was undoubtedly the one that gathered the others into that hulking slime form in the first place. Notably, the present five didn't look like they'd make something that large if they were squished together, so the skill likely had an additional growth effect. I didn't

really have the time to think about it any more deeply, because they all ganged up on me at once.

“I guess I should give up on my jelly snack...”

Maybe they were just slimes, but they could get pretty scary when they attacked simultaneously. Thankfully, my Holy Flame and Stone Bullet combo didn't fail me this time, and I finished them off with relative ease.

It seemed like the number of monsters in the dungeon increased over time. They probably spawned at regular intervals. I'd heard that was pretty par for the course.

With the slimes taken care of, I headed down to the second floor to meet my master, my heart still pounding.

“Long time no see, Master.”

<.....>

“Master?”

The once great Olivia Servant was still strung up in the cursed Death Chains, just like always. I kept telling her over and over that I was going to find a way to lift the curse that kept her trapped there, but she always brushed me off and said she didn't need me to. Maybe this bleak hole in a lonely dungeon was more comfortable than it looked?

“Are you asleep?” I felt a flutter of anxiety in my chest. “No...Master, you can't be de...” I casually jabbed my finger into her bellybutton.

<Ah ha ha ha ha!>

“I knew you were faking!”

<Grr...I hate you!> She sounded genuinely disappointed that I'd seen through her act.

“You really like playing pranks, don't you?”

<How else am I supposed to entertain myself? You haven't come to visit in aaaages! I thought you'd forgotten all about poor old Olivia.> “Sorry, I got a little caught up in things.”

<Things?>

“It’s a long story, are you sure you want to hear it?”

<Of course I do! I want to hear all about your first kiss!> “Gonna give that one a big ‘no.’”

<Lame.>

“Well, let’s see, where should I start...” With that, I hunkered down to regale her with everything I’d done to lift Maria’s curse, all the way up to the duke’s reward of a hundred million rels.

<I’m impressed. You really are my disciple after all.> “I never would have been able to do it without the powers you gave me.”

<Nah, that was all you. I never would’ve used up my own LP to help someone like that.> I probably would have felt similarly if I couldn’t replenish my LP, but luckily, it was a pretty easily renewable resource.

<Hrm, but, you know, now that you’ve got that big pile of money, you might wanna make a certain skill...> “Oh? What are you recommending now?”

<I dunno if I’d say I ‘recommend’ it, exactly, but there’s a skill that allows you to use money to generate LP. Admittedly, it’s not the most efficient.> “Why didn’t you tell me about it earlier?”

<I mean...you were kinda broke, weren’t you?>

Fair point. You could almost call her considerate. But now I was pretty dang flush, and anyway, I was willing to try anything once. I promptly examined the cost of creating the skill she described.

LP Generation via Money — 500 LP

I’d been scrimping and saving LP, so I had over 1,500. As such, the cost wasn’t a particular concern, but I wanted to know more about how it worked, first.

LP Generation via Money: 100,000 rels may be exchanged for 1 LP

Not the best exchange rate. It'd cost a million rels for ten LP, ten million for a hundred, and my full hundred million for a thousand. I investigated whether I could adjust the conversion rate with my Editor skill, but doing that cost an unbelievable amount of LP.

"Hrm..."

<See? It's pretty brutal on someone who's totally broke.> "It's pretty brutal even if you're not broke."

<True, but it might be good to have just in case. You can always use it if you strike it mega-rich.> Ultimately, I took my master's advice and went ahead and produced the skill. I did have that hundred million sitting in my Pocket Dimension. I'd officially designated half of it for my family, but they'd asked me to hold onto the entirety for them.

I decided to test the skill with ten thousand rels. As far as I could tell, you could use the skill by summoning it to your mind whilst either looking at the money or touching it. I squeezed a handful of coins and mentally declared my intent. When I opened my hand again, the coins had disappeared.

1025 LP → 1026 LP

It worked precisely as expected.

"I wonder where the money goes..."

<Good question.>

"Maybe those coins will reappear in some poor kid's house."

<You're such a romantic, Noir. It'd be nice if that was how it worked.> "Might as well think positive, right?"

Chatting with Olivia was always fun, but I needed to get a move on. That was when it occurred to me that I'd never mentioned my run-in with the black lion on the fifth floor. My master knew all sorts of things about monsters, so

maybe...

<Nope! Or, well, I've never seen one myself, but I heard stories back when I was an adventurer. I think there might've been a monster like that a hundred or two hundred years ago.> If it was that long ago when Olivia was adventuring, that would make it three to four hundred years ago now. She didn't seem to know anything else, so it was time to use my Dungeon Elevator skill to head to the fifth floor.

Having done that, I arrived near the stairway and was immediately at a complete loss for words.

<I have been waiting here for your return, human.>

The black lion was right there in front of me. And it still had that weird tulip growing out of its head!

I looked around slowly to make sure I knew exactly where the stairs were. If the creature tried to attack me, at least I could run.

<Can you not hear me, human?>

"I can hear you...loud and clear."

<I said: I have been waiting here for your return.>

Okay. Okay. The lion really could talk. And it seemed to be a creature of reason, too. I wanted to feel relieved, but I couldn't let my guard down. "Um, wait, so you've been waiting for me...since I was last down here?"

<Indeed.>

"Really? It's been a while. Have you been waiting here the *entire* time?"

<I confess, not the entire time. I have left this spot once every three days for approximately fifteen minutes to eat and defecate.> "But other than that...?"

<I have been waiting here for your return.>

There was something absolutely terrifying about how calm it was about it!

Chapter 3:

Tigerson

THE BLACK LION observed me with an unflinching severity. I was, as you might expect, appropriately terrified. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, but it didn't seem like he wanted to kill me, like, *right* away, so...

"Do you...want something from me?" I asked.

The lion nodded slowly. Unfortunately for me, reliable old Discerning Eye did jack and squat whenever I tried to turn it on him. He had some kind of skill that nullified its effects.

<For you to have made it so deep into the dungeon, you must be rather powerful.> "I think I'm lucky more than anything else."

<You needn't be so modest, human. If nothing else, you have come to the fifth level twice now. Do you intend to explore this entire dungeon?> "Well, I'm hoping to get as far as I can, but I'm not about to push myself too hard."

<Will you dare venture to the sixth floor?>

"Uh, yeah, I'm thinking about it."

<In that case, come with me. You may climb onto my back.> The lion knelt down. His body was massive, but I timidly obeyed. I lacked the courage to reject his offer.

"Whoa! It actually feels pretty great up here!" Even if there was a tulip blocking some of the view!

<What an innocent reaction.>

"Well excuse me, it's my first time riding a lion, you know."

<I am no lion. My name is Tigerson.>

"Huh? Tiger...son? So you're a tiger?"

<It is a worthy name, given to me by a worthy friend.>

Color me confused. Why would anyone name a lion after a tiger? Sure, I guess they were both big cats, but not even a little kid could mistake one for the

other. I couldn't help but feel like I was missing some kind of joke, but the big guy seemed proud of his name.

"S-so, you had friends, huh?"

<.....>

"Sorry, probably shouldn't have used past tense there."

<I do not mind.>

At that, the lion began to walk. I found myself swaying side to side with each step. ...And I couldn't take my eyes off that freaking tulip.

<Hmph... Do not fall off.>

"Um, you gonna do anything about that guy?"

A giant ant monster exactly like the one I'd fought before was straight ahead of us, rattling its immense mandibles.

<You may hold on to my mane.>

"Don't mind if I do."

I took a firm grip on Tigerson's mane. It was distractingly fluffy—and so soft! Even though we were about to head into life-threatening battle, I had a dumb, slack-jawed look on my face.

Tigerson started running and my hair whipped back. Despite his size, he could manage some impressive speed. Things looked like they were going to get chaotic when the giant ant lunged toward us but, in an instant, the ant had lost its head. I gaped, wondering where it'd gone—then I saw it in Tigerson's mouth.

<Hrm, the taste never improves.> Tigerson spat out the ant's head and walked on as if nothing had happened.

"Y-you're really strong, Mr. Tigerson."

<There is no need for such formalities. You may simply call me Tigerson.>

"Huh. I guess I will, then! I'm Noir Stardia, but you can just call me Noir."

<Noir, would you listen to my tale?>

Honestly, it sounded like the lead-in to some kind of quest. It seemed he

wanted me to do something for him after all. I eagerly agreed to hear him out.

<Approximately three hundred and fifty years ago, I accompanied my dear friend into this very dungeon. We made our way to the fifth level, but my friend insisted on heading to the sixth floor alone.> “What? Why?”

<From what we understood, there are a great number of traps on that level. My friend possessed a skill that could clear them, and insisted I stay here until the traps had been dealt with...even if it took him tens, no, hundreds of years.> Something seemed a little off about that estimate.

“Was your friend human...?”

<Why, no. My friend, Vashelle, is an elf. At any rate, I have been waiting three hundred and fifty years for his return.> That made more sense. Elves were known for their lengthy lifespans. The oldest were said to live about five hundred years. That had to be why Tigerson hadn't given up hope.

“You're pretty dang loyal, Tigerson. You never thought about going to the sixth floor yourself?”

<I...I made a promise to Vashelle that I would wait here.> And here he was after all this time, still waiting. I couldn't help but admire his fortitude.

“I'll look for your friend when I go to the sixth floor.”

<I would be most grateful.>

Although, I was a little worried about the possibility that some monster had gotten the better of Vashelle... But who knew, maybe he was trapped in some limbo like my master, Olivia.

“Since we're talking already, I've been dying to know: what's with that tulip?”

<It is an indicator of my current health. If it were to be severed, I would be greatly weakened.> “Do you have to water it or anything?”

<If you have water to spare, I would appreciate a portion. The only nourishment it has lately received is the occasional spurt of monster blood.> As luck would have it, I had a variety of supplies in my Pocket Dimension, so I pulled out a water flask and poured it out onto Tigerson's head.

<Ahhh... It has been so long since I last had water.>

“Does it feel that nice?”

<I would be very pleased if you would stroke my head as well.> “Like this?”

<Oh yes, yeeesss...> He almost sounded aroused.

“Ha ha ha, you know, Tigerson, you might look scary but you’re a pretty funny guy.”

<H-how embarrassing... I have a tendency to part with reason when faced with such attacks.> “Okay, then I guess I’ll have to give this spot *lots* of love if I ever get in a fight with you.”

<I would very much appreciate it if you did not.>

Somehow, I was getting the feeling that we could become fast friends. Not to mention, it sure was nice having a companion who could take out any monsters that might pass by.

When we got to the stairway to the sixth floor, Tigerson knelt down to let me off, then gave me a physical description of Vashelle. I would be on the lookout for a man in his thirties.

<That said, it is possible his appearance has changed since last I saw him. What will you do then?> “Naw, it won’t be a problem with my Discerning Eye. Well, I’m off!”

<May the gods protect my new friend!>

I headed down to the sixth floor as Tigerson saw me off with a magnificent roar. But the second I came down the stairs, my situation took a dramatic turn.

“Yeesh, that’s dark.”

It wasn’t pitch black, but there wasn’t any light, which severely reduced my field of vision. I did have the skill Blinding Light, but that was designed to disorient opponents and wouldn’t do me much good in a search. I wracked my brain for other ideas and mulled some new skills.

Night Vision — 200 LP

Perfect. I Got Creative and produced the skill. Instantly, it was easier to see. I seemed to be in a corridor, so I progressed forward with care, looking out for any enemies.

“Ah, there. I think there’s something.”

I put up my guard. As I did, a groaning humanoid figure shambled aimlessly ahead of me.

Chapter 4:

Zombification

RIGHT OFF THE BAT, I had a few regrets about my improved vision.

“Urghhh...”

For example, the creature loitering around ahead of me was totally terrifying! It had almost no hair, one of its eyes was hanging out, and its skin looked like it was rotten. It wasn’t wearing any clothes, either. So, you know, as far as I could tell, it was pretty dang male.

Name: Sextuple Zombie

Level: 110

Skills: Contagious; Undead

Contagious: Any creature whose skin is damaged by bites or scratches from a Contagious creature will become a zombie. The rate of infection varies from individual to individual.

The zombie rushed me while I was reading its stats, so I quickly fired off a Stone Bullet.

Pew! It flew right past. Not again!

“Ughhh...”

I was struggling to understand what the heck the “sextuple” part of the creature’s name was supposed to mean when the zombie suddenly fell to pieces—a head, torso, right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg. Six pieces! They all slithered and scabbled across the floor toward me.

“Whoa?!”

The right arm leapt toward my face. I crouched to dodge and the zombie’s

head flew up at me from the ground.

“Hiyah!”

I rolled to the side, turned around, and bolted.

“He who deigns to run away lives to fight another day!”

I mean, come on, if I took a single hit, I’d get infected. It was way too dangerous. Thankfully, I was quicker on my feet than the zombie. I managed to put considerable distance between us.

It didn’t seem like the zombie could maintain that split-up form for very long. My guess was that it would soon return to its original location and take up its old hobby of wandering around and groaning to itself.

From a safe distance, I examined some skill options for dealing with my new predicament.

Zombieproof — 500 LP

As far as I could tell, that would make me totally immune to zombification, but it was a little on the expensive side, especially as I only had 800 LP left. I would’ve given it a go if I had another couple hundred more, but if I were to use my newly acquired money-conversion ability, that’d be twenty or thirty million rels...

“Well, that sucks...”

I was seriously considering leaving and coming back later, but first I got as close to the zombie as I could. I needed more information. While in stealth-mode, I used my Discerning Eye to pick up where I left off.

The Undead skill, as you might expect, meant that the zombie wouldn’t die from taking regular damage. It did have a weakness: attacks with holy and light attributes nullified its immunity. That meant my Holy Flame might just do the trick.

“Uuughh?!”

Bullseye. The flames flew from my hand and I was victorious. The zombie went down in no time! I was satisfied that, at least, taking them on one at a time wouldn't be a problem. I'd even leveled up for my troubles, so I decided to resume my search.

This sixth level, like the second floor, had a passage lined with doors that led into small rooms. I was concerned about possible traps, but the promise of untold treasure tempted me to open one.

"Urghhh!"

Or not!

The room was jam-packed full of zombies. My father always told me Stardia men didn't have the greatest mental fortitude, and I was no exception.

"Mr. Vashelle, are you in here?" I called out timidly. I would have shouted louder, but I was worried about attracting another sextuple zombie.

Suddenly, I remembered that room on the fourth floor, the one full of the souls of people who'd died in the hidden dungeon. There had been an elf in the crowd, but she had been a woman.

"Huh. I guess that means he isn't dead."

Yeah, I was confident that Vashelle was alive. Although that did beg the question...why hadn't he returned? Maybe he'd been caught in a trap like my master? If that was the case, I needed to summon my courage and get down to investigating these rooms. It wasn't going to be easy, but I had to push on.

As I turned the corner of the passage, I immediately found myself face-to-face with another zombie. Just as I was about to fry it with Holy Flame, I noticed something strange.

"Huh?"

This zombie still had hair. What's more, it looked like it was wearing clothes, though they were in tatters. It even wore bangles.

"Urghh ugahh..."

Fortunately, it was moving a lot slower than the sextuple zombie, so I had time to analyze it with my Discerning Eye. First, I established that the bangle

was only decorative—no special skills to speak of. As for the rest...

Name: Zombie

Level: 170

Skills: Archery (Grade B); Dual Wielded Daggers (Grade C); Sharp Ears; Wind Strike; Zombified

It was an odd set of skills for your average zombie, which made me suspect this particular zombie might be...

“Can you understand me? Please stop.”

“Uuuh...”

“Welp, I guess that’s not going to work.”

Thankfully, it was super slow. I did a speedy backstep and looked into the Zombified skill.

Zombified: Turned into a zombie via a Contagious carrier. Creature will attack any humans or animals on pure instinct. Cannot be reasoned with.

I quickly opened my Editor skill.

Delete “zombie” — 500 LP

Ugh, that’d leave me with a scant 300 LP. I withdrew for a moment and pulled out ten million rels—a sizable sum, but I didn’t hesitate. If that zombie was who I thought it was, ten million rels was nothing. The money disappeared in an instant and earned me a quick 100 LP.

Feeling a little more secure with the knowledge that I would have 400 LP left after this, I deleted the word “zombie,” which in turn removed the skill.

“Uuh, uuuh—huh? What was I...?”

In an instant, the zombie’s rotten skin became smooth and healthy. And, perhaps it was simply a result of the return of his mental faculties, but his expression made him seem like a completely different person. And his ears... were pointed. He definitely seemed to be an elf.

“Um, you wouldn’t happen to be Mr. Vashelle, would you?”

“Uh, yes, I am. And who might you be?”

Yes! I did a little fist pump in celebration. *I’m so glad I didn’t fry him to a crisp!*

Chapter 5:

Friends

“HOW DO YOU DO, SIR, I’m Noir Stardia. Say, I just want to make sure, but what’s the last thing you remember?”

“Remember? Ooh! That’s right! Yes, I got attacked by that disgusting zombie and was running for my life, and...huh. I don’t remember anything after that.”

“That’s probably because you were turned into a zombie.”

“Wh-what?”

“I’m afraid you were infected by that very zombie, and you’ve been one for three hundred and fifty years. But I just used one of my skills to cure you.”

Vashelle seemed to be in shock. So shocked, in fact, that tears and snot streamed down his face. “S-so, that means I’m already a three-hundred-and-eighty-year-old grandpa?! Please tell me this is a joke.”

“Well, you look plenty young on the outside. Maybe you didn’t age while you were under the influence of the contagion?”

“Seriously?! Oof, that’s good news, at least. You said your name was Noir, right? Sorry to ask, but would you be willing to escort me back to the first floor? I’ve had quite enough of this dungeon.”

“Of course. But first we need to go to the fifth floor, where your dear friend Tigerson is waiting for you!” I said in a cheerful tone.

I mean, he was going to be reunited with a cool friend like Tigerson, who wouldn’t be stoked about that? But Vashelle froze.

“Seriously?” He clutched his head and sank to the floor, wailing.

He seemed a little, uh, emotionally unstable. And here I thought elves were supposed to be even-tempered.

“Tigerson’s still waiting for me? It’s been three hundred and fifty years, hasn’t it?”

“Yup. But he’s been faithfully waiting for your return. He followed your order

to the letter and hasn't ever left the fifth floor."

"No way... How can he be so..." Vashelle's eyes filled with tears as he was overcome with emotion. "Tigerson was just a random nickname, you know, but he liked it so much... I know he looks intimidating, but he's a really sweet guy. We met before we came here, when he saved me from a monster attack. He almost left without saying a word, but I stopped him and asked him to be my friend and comrade."

Apparently, at Vashelle's request, Tigerson's face had filled with awed delight. At that moment, Tigerson said: *<I've never had a friend before.>* "I originally entered this dungeon so I could propose to my hometown sweetheart," Vashelle explained.

"You were looking for a ring?"

"I was after an even greater treasure, in fact, and Tigerson was kind enough to accompany me."

Tigerson's skills were powerful even against the rigors of the hidden dungeon, and they quickly made it to the fifth floor. But by then, Vashelle was starting to feel guilty about his lack of contribution to the party.

"I hadn't done a single thing. That's why I wanted to tackle the sixth floor on my own. I mean, can you really call yourself a friend if you're always the one being protected?"

I felt a weight sliding off my shoulders as I learned the whole story. Tigerson hadn't been abandoned, after all.

"Noir, no, Mr. Noir, I beg of you, please take me to Tigerson!" Vashelle bowed his head deeply.

There was no way I could say no. Plus, reuniting these two comrades was why I was here to begin with.

"Of course. Come on, let's get going."

"Thanks!"

I escorted Vashelle straight to the stairs, taking care to look out for zombies on the way. And at the top of the stairs to the fifth floor, waiting for us, was

Tigerson. Frankly, he looked adorable.

<My friend! You are safe!> Tigerson roared for joy and bounded forward to nuzzle Vashelle.

“Tigerson! You’re such a dummy! How could you wait here for three hundred and fifty years?!”

<You asked me to wait, so I waited.>

“Come on, I mean...oh...fine! I guess we’re both idiots in our own way.”

Tigerson and Vashelle rejoiced in their reunion as I watched with a big smile. Then Vashelle remembered something and the atmosphere changed abruptly.

“Listen to me, Tigerson,” said Vashelle.

<Why the strange expression, my friend?>

“I think I want to give up on exploring this dungeon.”

<Hmph, I think that is a very good idea. I believe this dungeon is far too dangerous.> “And, uh...I think I should go back to my hometown. I’m sure my sweetheart has found another man by now, but just in case...”

I guess there was a chance she was still waiting for him? The one problem was that Vashelle’s hometown was in elf territory, where other species weren’t permitted.

“So, well, this might be goodbye for us...”

<I see... You ought to go to the one you love.>

Tigerson was clearly hiding how he felt. Vashelle’s face, on the other hand, was full of emotion.

“Life is finite,” he said in a pained tone. “Yet I wasted three hundred and fifty years of yours. I’m so sorry.”

<You did no such thing. I waited because I felt like it, nothing more.> “From now on, I want you to use your time for your own sake, Tigerson. This is a request as your friend.”

<Very well, then. For now, I shall spend my time accompanying you to the entrance.> Tigerson knelt and Vashelle climbed on his back. They invited me to

join, but I turned them down.

“I’ll wait at the entrance for you,” I told them. “Watch out for monsters.”

With that, I used my Dungeon Elevator skill to return to the first floor and left the dungeon. They probably had a lot to catch up on, so I figured it was better to give them some quality time with just the two of them.

After a pretty long while, Vashelle and Tigerson arrived at the dungeon entrance looking at peace with themselves and each other. They must have spent their time together well. Vashelle got down off Tigerson’s back. It was time for them to part.

“I guess this is goodbye.”

<I wish you a long life and good health, Vashelle.>

“When things calm down, I promise I’ll come see you again. Stay safe.”

<Hmph, I shall. My health is my one redeeming quality, after all.> “Ha ha, you said it. And as for you Mr. Noir, I have nothing but gratitude. When next we meet, I promise to bring you delicious food and fine goods from my country.”

“I can’t wait.”

“And could I ask you to look after Tigerson? Unlike myself, he has no family to speak of.”

“I’m not sure I’m a fitting replacement for you, Vashelle.”

<The two of you needn’t worry about me. I will be just as fine as I ever have been.> “All right, then. Well, I just want to say that I had a great deal of fun exploring the dungeon with you, Tigerson.”

<I look forward to when next we meet.>

Together, we watched Vashelle walk off down the road. He turned around several times to wave at us and, each time, Tigerson let out a howl of goodbye. Once Vashelle was entirely out of sight, Tigerson turned to me.

<Noir, I must thank you. Come visit me in the future that I might repay you properly.> “No, no, you don’t owe me anything. But what are you going to do now?”

<I shall return to the fifth floor. I...have forgotten something there.> “Oh, well, okay.”

<Goodbye,> he said and returned to the dungeon.

There was something heartbreaking about watching him just up and return. I started wondering if he was telling the truth about having forgotten something. It was entirely possible he was just putting on a brave face.

I stood there for almost an hour, trying to figure out whether I should follow him. Ultimately, I marched back inside and used my Dungeon Elevator skill to go straight to the fifth floor. I proceeded carefully down the large hall, keeping an eye out for giant ants.

I had nothing to worry about.

“Holy crap, is this all Tigerson?”

The level was littered with monster corpses. I kept going, taking care not to trip over any of them.

As I went, I heard a moaning. I tiptoed toward it, nervous to meet the source, until I stopped in my tracks. Tigerson was facing one of the back walls, howling at the ceiling.

No...he wasn't howling. He was crying.

I walked up behind him and touched his back. His fur was plush and thick.

<Is that you, Noir?>

“Tigerson... You really miss Vashelle, don't you?”

<I knew we would someday part, but it all happened so quickly, I...I am so weak.> “You're not weak. Anyone would be sad. You know what? If you'd have me, I'd love to be your friend, too. Not to replace Vashelle, but maybe it'd make you feel a little better not to be alone.”

<You wish to be friends...with me?>

“Yeah. Only if you want to, of course.”

Tigerson fell silent for a while and then turned toward me. He looked me square in the eye. *<There is...nothing of particular interest in being my friend.>*

“You said you wanted to repay me, right? Well, this’ll do just fine.”

<Oh...I see. Then from today forward, you are my friend, Noir. Climb upon my back.> Tigerson knelt down and I got on up. The view really was fantastic. *<I am in an excellent mood. Hang on, I intend to run.>* “Got it! Let’s go!”

Tigerson dashed on through the dungeon as I held on tight, reveling in his luxurious mane. It really did feel amazing.

Chapter 6:

One of the Family

WE LEFT THE DUNGEON, still running through the dazzling sunset light. The wind felt cool and wonderful against my skin. If you're wondering how fast we were going, I'd say just fast enough to outrun the wolf monster just behind us.

<Shall we help the poor creature?>

"I'll handle it."

Said poor creature was the rabbit the wolf monster was hunting. Circle of life and all that, but wolf monsters frequently went after humans, so it struck me as a good idea to take it out. I fired off a Stone Bullet that was about two feet in diameter.

The wolf monster shrieked and crumpled. It didn't look like it was about to get up again.

<How far shall I take you, Noir? Ought I let you off at the entrance to town?>

"If you're up to it, why not swing by my place? It's not very big, but we do have a yard, and my father's always talking about how much he wants a guard dog."

<In that case, I shall join you.>

Tigerson increased his pace and in no time at all, we arrived at the town gates. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we caused a bit of a stir.

The gatekeeper trembled, his jaw hanging agape. "M-m-monster attack!"

<Fear not, I am without hostile intent.>

"He's telling the truth. He's my familiar." I slid off Tigerson's back like it was no big deal and proceeded to give him a series of demeaning orders. "Sit! Shake!"

Tigerson obliged with an expression of utter passivity. Thankfully, the gatekeeper bought our act and we finally got permission to enter. *Sorry for treating you like a dog, Tigerson.*

As we walked through the town, all eyes were on me and my colossal new

friend. Murmurs broke out all around us.

“What is that? A familiar?”

“Why does it have a flower on its head?”

“Whatever it is, it sure is imposing. I wonder if it’s really under that kid’s control...”

<People seem rather fearful of me.>

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’ll just convince them you’re my familiar and you’ll be popular in no time.”

“Noir?! What are you doing up there?”

All of a sudden, I ran into a familiar face—a beautiful girl who looked like she’d been shopping on the outskirts of town. Emma was as glowing as always, and her chest bounced as she ran toward me. She slowed a little as she got closer, taking in Tigerson’s impressive presence.

“I’ve never seen a monster like that before... Is it your familiar, Noir?”

<I am Noir’s friend, Tigerson. It is a pleasure to meet you.> “Same here! My name’s Emma.”

<Would you care to climb onto my back as well?> “I can’t say no to that, can I?”

Emma hopped on behind me. She marveled at the view, then wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me tight. The close contact was enough to earn me some LP, which was nice, but something was bugging me.

“What’s up with you, Emma?”

“I’m scared of heights, but this makes me feel better.”

“But we spend so much time up at the top of the town clocktower and stuff, when did this phobia develop?”

“About...ten seconds ago?”

Huh. I guess people can develop phobias pretty easily.



Tigerson glanced back to check on us. <Noir, you and Emma are quite close. Are you in a romantic relationship?> “Huh?” said Emma. “Oh, no, we’re not. Right, Noir?”

“Yeah, we’re just best friends.”

“How can you agree with that so easily! Am I *that* unattractive?!”

“What? That’s not...”

“Whatever. I’m not talking to you anymore. I’m mad at you.” Even though Emma pouted, her arms were still wrapped tightly around me.

On the way to my house, I spotted a couple of other familiar faces. First was Lola—the guild receptionist in a green uniform with shoulder-length brown hair which gave her a cute, energetic image. Next to her was a half-elf beauty, Luna, with her perfect figure and her favorite magical firearm holstered on her hip. She had a cool air and a lively tongue.

A pair of men were hovering around the girls, trying to pick them up.

“Oh come on, it won’t be long. I’ll pay for your meal too.”

“Please? It’s not a bad deal, is it?”

I was a little leery as we approached, but Lola was handling the situation expertly as she walked along.

“You know, we have *extremely* high standards,” she said.

“Tell me what your type is, then,” one of the men insisted.

“My ‘type’ is my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend? You have a boyfriend... What’s he like?”

“His name’s Noir, and he’s very thoughtful.”

She must’ve dropped my name to get them to stop hitting on her. The men seemed pretty disheartened, so I guess it worked. But they weren’t about to give up completely, and they turned their attentions on Luna.

“Lemme guess, you have a guy too?”

“I do indeed.”

“Wh-what’s he like?”

“His name is Sir Noir and he’s the third son of a noble family.”

“What in the?!” both men shouted in unison.

I figured it was a good time to play backup, so I swung by and announced my presence. “Hey guys, I’m the Noir everyone’s been talking about.”

“What?!”

The two men were shocked—and probably a little terrified—to see a man ride up on a giant black lion.

I put my hands on Tigerson’s ruff. “Lola, Luna. This is my new friend. Wanna ride?”

“You know I do!” said Lola.

“Absolutely,” said Luna.

“Thought so.”

The two girls climbed up onto Tigerson’s back. Despite the fact that there were now four whole people up there, we had plenty of space. Even so, a fight broke out over where everyone would sit. They all agreed I should be in front, but Emma and Lola argued over who got to sit behind me.

“That’s my spot! Why are you trying to squirm your way in here!”

“That’s not set in stone. I’m Mr. Noir’s receptionist, after all.”

“Two can play at that game. I’ve been his best friend since we were kids. Clearly I’m more deserving of the position.”

“Really? You’re still stuck at ‘best friends’ even though you’ve known him for over ten years. Where do you get off acting all high and mighty?”

“Excuse me?!”

Emma and Lola always fought. It was too bad, really. They had such similar personalities. Luna just watched from the sidelines, shaking her head.

“Well, as a compromise,” she said, “I suppose I’ll sit behind Sir Noir.”

“Like hell you will!” the two of them shouted simultaneously.

Tigerson seemed to admire their energy. <*Your friends are quite vigorous, Noir.*> “It never gets boring with them around, that’s for sure. My family’s no less ‘unique’ either.”

<*I look forward to meeting them.*>

Eventually, we dropped the three girls off and all agreed to meet up someday soon. Finally, Tigerson and I entered my neighborhood and ambled down the street to my house. My family had a small yard on the other side of a stone wall, and beyond that, we could see straight into the living room. It was a lovely, warm day. The windows were open, and I could hear my parents and Alice talking.

“I’d protect you even if I knew I’d die. I’d even go up against a dragon to protect you and Alice,” said my father.

“Goodness, dear, what about Noir?”

“A man’s gotta be able to protect himself. Maybe I’ll have to train Noir when he gets home.”

“Are you certain you do not mean he will train you, father?”

“Yes, I’m certain, Alice! I’m still stronger than him! And I’m still his father!”

Father seemed to be bursting with energy as always. Honestly, I was glad to see he was acting like his usual self. I went around and opened the door. Thankfully, Tigerson fit through, if only just. Father must have heard us because he ran over to the front door to greet me.

“Hey, Noir, welcome ho—whaaaa?!” My father fell to his knees when he saw Tigerson. I was standing right next to Tigerson, but he didn’t seem to notice me. “Eeeek! Honey! Alice! Save me! There’s some awful *thing* here...”

My father crawled back into the living room like a sextuple zombie. Just as he vanished, mother and Alice emerged and blinked up at Tigerson.

“Goodness, how remarkable. Welcome home, Noir.”

“Brother, is this your familiar? It’s marvelous.”

They were comparatively calm. Finally, the sturdy pillar of the Stardia family noticed my presence, stood up, and started strutting around. “Ahem! Your

familiar?” said my father. “How wonderful. At any rate, welcome home, Noir.”

“Father, I hate to inform you, but your pants are falling down.”

“Oh no! I almost flashed everyone!”

Don't worry, no one wants to see that.

“I'll get straight to the point: I want to keep Tigerson here.”

“Shouldn't that be 'Lionson' or something?” my father asked. “More importantly...it doesn't bite, does it?”

<I would never do such a thing. Noir is my dear friend, so I consider his family as my own.> “It can talk?! Wow, how smart.”

“He should be able to get around just fine in the living room and the yard, and he could guard the house during the day, too,” I said.

There were actually a number of ne'er-do-wells in our neighborhood and, even though we were poor, we'd been burgled a few times. Though the thieves typically went after food, not money.

Alice and my mother were absolutely in favor of the new family guard...cat. They had already started petting him. Meanwhile, my father was still afraid.

“Umm, but how will we explain this to the neighbors?”

“Can't we just say he's my familiar? You don't mind, do you, Tigerson?”

<Not in the slightest. I am perfectly content to be your familiar, or your pet, or whatever you will.> “See? So, what do you say?”

“Fine... It'll probably eat me if I say no anyway...”

He's not gonna eat you, for cryin' out loud. But father had agreed, so from that day on Tigerson was basically another member of our family. My mother was already calling him “Tigey.”

“I believe we'll have to do something special for dinner tonight,” she said. “Please, have a seat, Tigey.”

<Your kindness is most appreciated.>

Tigerson crouched down and Alice delightedly combed through his mane with

her fingers.

“Hey,” father whispered in my ear. “What’s with the tulip on its head?”

“Oh, that...?”

It didn’t really look like I was going to have to explain it—Alice was gently stroking the flower.

<Ahh, that’s—ahh!>

Clearly, it was a uniquely sensitive spot.

“As you can see, doing that makes him act a little silly.”

“I see. It’s just like when your mother—”

“I think you should just leave it there.”

Father looked like he was going to try and touch the flower, but ultimately gave up. Poking Tigerson’s happily swaying tail was about as far as his courage could take him.

And that was how Tigerson became a part of the Stardia family.

Chapter 7:

Another Exam Begins

THE NEXT MORNING, I hugged my mother and Alice like I always did and my father pouted, whining that it was misandry not to include him. It wasn't much, but I did earn some LP from these daily habits. Unfortunately, repeating actions didn't earn additional LP; I had to wait a bit for them to be effective again. It seemed to vary depending on the action, but hugs appeared to work about once a day.

<Noir, do you think it would work across species barriers?> Tigerson asked.

"I kinda doubt it. Plus, you're a male, aren't you?"

<Indeed. Although, I am unsure whether my species has females. I have been alone as long as I can remember.> If he'd been alone for hundreds of years, it was no wonder he was so eager to make friends.

"That reminds me," I said. "Do you have any special skills? I can see other people's abilities with my Discerning Eye, but it doesn't seem to work on you."

<I would not know myself.>

"Huh."

I decided to call upon the Great Sage. In days past, using the skill would unerringly give me an unbearable headache, but I'd given myself Headache Immunity, so a few questions weren't an issue. Of course, I had to take care not to ask too many, or anything especially complicated.

Oh, Great Sage, is there a skill that blocks Discerning Eye?

<There is a Conceal skill.>

Well, that was annoying. Without Discerning Eye, I couldn't use my Editor skill, either. I probably needed to train in case I ever encountered an enemy with a similar feature.

Emma was at the front door to walk with me to the academy, so I wolfed down my breakfast and headed out to meet her.

“Good morning, Noir!”

“Morning, Emma! You look as *powerful* as ever today.”

“What do you think you’re looking at, perv boy?”

Sorry, Emma. Despite my misbehavior, she immediately greeted me with a hug. She understood that it would help me earn LP, so I was grateful. But...there were a lot of people walking by that morning.

“I appreciate it, Emma, but I got the LP, so you can let go.”

“Oh? Are you sure you don’t need a little more?”

“Look, I’m a little embarrassed. Everyone’s looking at us.”

“Fine, then. Let’s get going.”

With that, we walked to the academy together as always. At the entrance, we met the duke’s daughter, Maria, and her retainer, Amane.

“How do you do, Mr. Noir.”

“Good morning,” I replied. “The two of you certainly stand out when you’re together.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you’re both so beautiful, you naturally attract attention.”

Emma jabbed me with her elbow. “Isn’t it a little early to be trying to pick up chicks? Not a great look, Noir.”

“Oh come on, I wasn’t trying to do that...”

“He he, I see the two of you are close as ever,” said Maria.

She didn’t mean anything mean by that remark, so I forced a smile. I wasn’t entirely sure why I felt so embarrassed. Anyway, the next thing she said blew all of that away.

“Exams start today. I’m sure the two of you will have no trouble.”

It hadn’t been long since we were accepted into the academy, but apparently it was already time for exams. According to Maria, these were long-term tests. We’d be getting details from our homeroom teacher, Ms. Elena.

“Oh, I just remembered! Ms. Elena needs me for something! Talk to you later!” I rushed to the teacher’s lounge.

When I got there, Ms. Elena was sitting in a chair, cracking her stiff shoulders. “You’re late, Noir. How long did you intend to keep me waiting?”

“Sorry, it just totally slipped my mind.”

“I’ll forgive you, since you admitted it. Now hurry it up.”

“Is this good?” I started rubbing her shoulders. I had a Shoulder Rub skill now, and I knew just which spots to hit. As I got to work, her mood steadily improved and she relaxed under my hands. “By the way, Ms. Elena, I heard we have exams?”

“You do. But I can’t tell you what’s on them yet.”

“Oh...”

No matter how many shoulder rubs I gave her, she refused to give me preferential treatment. That said, I wasn’t exactly doing this for free.

“Ms. Elena, I think you owe me a hug about now.”

“Oh, right. C’mere.”

We ducked into a more private room, where she gave me a hug. There wasn’t anything indecent about it, per se, but it seemed a little inappropriate for a teacher and student to do something like that too brazenly. I got my LP from the encounter and we headed to the classroom separately.

In homeroom, everyone was chattering about the upcoming exam. The students were filled with dread, though some were excited for it, too. Apparently, there was some kind of special prize for the people with the best scores.

“All right, quiet down. Before class starts, I’m gonna explain the exam,” Ms. Elena said. “This’ll be your first exam since entering the academy. We conduct these tests in a variety of formats, but this one will be similar to your entrance exam. It’ll have a big impact on your first trimester grades.”

The school year at the Hero Academy was split into three trimesters, the first from spring to summer, the second from fall to winter, and the third from

winter to spring.

“The exam starts today and ends in one month. You must submit monster materials at the end of it. However, the required materials have been predetermined by the academy.”

Ms. Elena went on to explain the details. There were three types of applicable materials:

- 1. Red Lizardman Tail (3,500 points per tail)***
- 2. Unicorn Horn (50,000 points per horn)***
- 3. Any Dragon Fang (300,000 points per fang, up to two per student)***

Like the entrance exam, there were no restrictions on how the materials were obtained. Teams were permissible, but each member would be scored individually and points would be evenly split.

The grading scale was as follows:

0–4,999 Points: Fail out of S-Class

5,000–9,999 Points: Required to attend full days at summer school

10,000–99,999 Points: Required to attend half days at summer school
100,000+ Points: No summer school required

The top scorer would also get a special prize from the school.

“The path to becoming a hero isn’t easy. You must remain steadfast, but you mustn’t overextend yourself. If I’m being honest, option three is out of the question for you lot, but I wish you all good luck.”

Everyone wore a look of quiet determination. After all, you needed at least two lizardman tails to stay in S-Class. But me? I was going to do my damndest to try for the 100,000 points.

After class, Emma and I headed for the guild hall to meet up with Luna. The three of us were going adventuring together.

“Hey, Noir, let’s team up to earn points for the exam!” said Emma.

“Yeah, I was just about to suggest that.”

“I wonder if Luna will help. All the items are pretty valuable. They’re infamous for selling out the second they come on the market.”

So in other words, unlike in the entrance exam, no one was going to be able to buy their way to passing. Plus, even the low-scoring red lizardmen were pretty rare.

“How much are you going for, Emma?”

“We should both try for 100,000. That way we can do whatever we want over summer break!”

“That’d be ideal. But I think there’s a bit of a problem...”

We’d need to take out monsters like dragons and unicorns to pull that off, and that was going to be difficult with our current abilities.

All thoughts of exams poofed out of our heads once we set foot inside the Odin guild hall.

“Let me go! Let me go, Luna!”

“Calm down, Lola! Violence is not the answer!”

“Oh yeah? Then maybe that idiot shouldn’t have asked for a punch in the teeth!”

We were met with an extremely provocative sight. Lola was red in the face as Luna desperately attempted to restrain her. It looked like she was ready to throw down with another receptionist.

Emma and I exchanged looks and dashed over.



Chapter 8:

Lola's Battle

“WHAT’S GOING ON?”

“You have excellent timing, Sir Noir. I need some help keeping Lola under control.”

“What crawled up her butt?” asked Emma.

“Not even you can stop me, Mr. Noir!”

“Okay,” I said. “But why are you so mad?”

“That jerk Sarah keeps stealing my adventurers!”

I looked over at Sarah—she looked to be about twenty and had a glamorous figure, beautiful facial features, and long hair. There was nothing timid about the bold smirk on her face.

“I’ll have you know,” she said, “I haven’t broken a single rule. Are you sure you’re not just losing adventurers because you’re lacking in charm?”

“You lying witch! You’ve been seducing them!”

“That’s a funny way to say you can’t compete.”

Sarah shot a glance at the receptionists’ scorecard tacked up on the wall. The bar graph showed that she was far and away the top scorer. The others weren’t even close. This month, Lola appeared to be in third place.

The guild employed older men and women in various clerical positions, but the receptionists who interacted directly with the adventurers were by and large attractive young women. Adventurers had the option of choosing (or not) any of the receptionists to manage us once we hit D-Rank. Luna and I, along with Emma (despite her frustration) had selected Lola to manage us.

When an adventurer completed a task, their receptionist’s score went up. The scores determined the receptionist’s status—so the more adventurers a receptionist managed, the higher their score, the higher their wages, and the more on-site privileges they got.

About once a month, the receptionists offered some kind of prize to their adventurers, hence the thirty-minute shoulder rub coupon I got from Lola. We were also free to change receptionists at any time. You could even switch regularly if you wanted. It seemed like Sarah had just seduced away some of Lola's adventurers.

"Does this happen a lot?" I asked Luna.

"No, there's actually something of an unwritten rule among the receptionists, but..."

Now it made sense, Sarah had broken an unspoken code of honor. That was what had made Lola snap.

"This Sarah chick's always been up to this kind of thing," Lola snarled.

"Like. I. Said," said Sarah. "Do you even have any proof? Did anyone tell you I made an untoward gesture?"

"Well, no."

"Then who are you to say that I've done anything illegitimate? Maybe they're just tired of your sloppy work."

"Sloppy work?!"

"Yes, yes, yes, now if you're *that* frustrated by this turn of events, why don't you actually make an effort to beat me for once in your sorry life?"

"If I beat you," Lola replied, red in the face, "will you swear to never use these underhanded tactics again?"

"I'm not using any 'underhanded tactics' to begin with, but...sure, I'll swear to continue not using them if you beat me."

"Fine," said Lola. "Then I accept your challenge."

"But in exchange," said Sarah, "if I win, I will take one of your adventurers."

"You aren't after Luna, are you...?"

Luna was a C-Grade adventurer and had a lot more points than either me or Emma. But Sarah's eyes were set on *me*.

"Mr. Noir Stardia, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Sarah Longhran!" She

bowed, casually squeezing her breasts together to give me a good look at her cleavage. She was a crafty one.

“Y-y-you want to steal Noir?!”

“Considering Noir is Olivia’s—oh, wait, that’s a secret, isn’t it? Considering he’s such an incredible person, his skills could never properly develop under your management. Now, if I were managing him, I’d make sure to send him out on extremely *pleasurable* missions.”

The clerical staff could sneak a look at the adventurers’ records. Sarah must have discovered that I had my master’s skills, Get Creative, Bestow, and Editor. My curiosity was piqued, so I used my Discerning Eye to look into Sarah and let me tell you, I was shocked by what I found. *Just who is she?! She specialized in that kind of skill?!*

By “that” kind of skill, I mean, well, let’s just say a more indecent variation on my Shoulder Rub skill, if you catch my drift. That must’ve been how she commanded such ardent support from the men.

“I’ll give you one month to beat my score. Don’t forget our agreement, Lola.”

“Ugh...I didn’t think you’d be after Noir...”

Sarah ignored the deflated Lola and walked over to me. “I just can’t *wait* to become your manager, Mr. Noir.”

She deployed the same killer tactic as before, but this time from point-blank range. My endurance was wearing thin. Whenever Sarah was near me, my head started to spin. If Lola didn’t beat her in a month, I might actually end up letting Sarah manage me...

At which point I suddenly noticed the intense negative aura emanating from Emma. “Hey, Noir, you’re not thinking that it would be a win-win for you, are you? *Are you?!*”

Emma’s face was a terrifying sight to behold. And of course I wasn’t thinking that...much.

“I don’t believe Sir Noir is that kind of man,” said Luna, “no matter how impressive the bosoms on display. Though, I have to admit, they are quite

alluring. Perhaps she might finally prove a worthy match to Lady Emma. I couldn't possibly hope to compete."

"Y-you know I don't judge women on cup size, right?"

"You sure about that?" Emma asked. "You are kind of a closet perv."

"Hey!"

Unfortunately, I couldn't exactly deny it. I was a healthy young man, you know?

But Lola looked like she was getting even angrier. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing! Sorry!"

We all hastily apologized and segued into missions. First, we strategized about Sarah.

"Honestly now, what do you think your chances are?" I asked.

"Hrm...well, I'm gonna try my best. I absolutely hate people who break the rules, and I'm not letting anyone else manage you, Mr. Noir."

"We'll do whatever we can to help, I promise. Just give us any and all high-value requests you have. Got anything with dragons, maybe? We've got our own competition going on this month."

I explained the conditions of our school exam. Lola did know of a request for dragon parts, but it was B-Rank, and we weren't allowed to take requests more than one grade above us. Even if Emma and I managed to succeed and acquire the materials, we wouldn't get guild points for it. Although...we had Luna in our party, and she was a C-Rank adventurer. More importantly, the parts required for the request didn't include the dragon's fangs.

"Plus," said Lola, "completing a dragon-related request will add considerably to my score."

"Then we'll do it! I'll admit I'm a little nervous, but I think we can probably manage."

"Oh, but there's one problem..." said Lola. "The only known living dragons

reside in a restricted zone.”

Treasure Mountain was off-limits to anyone but the royal family, a handful of nobles, and adventurers of Rank C and above. As you might imagine, it was also home to some incredibly delicious fruits and nuts, along with medicinal herbs that fetched a high price at market.

“Supposedly dragons nest there, too, but quite a number of people have died going after them, so the kingdom has curtailed access.”

Just to be sure, I called on the Great Sage to ask where the nearest dragon was, and sure enough it was on Treasure Mountain.

“I guess we should focus on getting to C-Rank first. You okay with that, Emma?”

“Sounds great to me.”

“As your friend, I shall aid you however I can. Heh...friend.” Luna had been working as a solo adventurer for a long time, so the sound of the word “friend” was particularly sweet to her.

“Got it,” said Lola. “Then I’ll keep assigning you requests, Mr. Noir.”

“Please do.”

Our goal was to defeat a dragon within the month! That way, we could score high on our exam and Lola would get a big boost to her score. But it would be no easy task. First, we’d have to plow through a whole heck-ton of monsters.

Chapter 9:

Tiptoeing Through the Graveyard

THERE WERE SOME RUINS to the southeast of town. It used to be a famous church, but now it was a sad and desolate place. We had come to it for the graveyard.

Eight pumpkin-faced monsters danced before me, all clad in black pointy hats and tattered robes. Their features were carved into the pumpkins, so you could see straight through to their pulpy orange interiors, but they had human-like hands—albeit desiccated ones. Monsters like this were supposedly common in graveyards.

Name: Jack-o'-Lantern Level: 39

Skills: Depression Canon (Grade C)

Grade C skills were the weakest, although this particular skill was utterly unfamiliar.

“Sir Noir, we should split up to fight them.”

“Sounds good.”

“Do your best, everybody!”

The jack-o'-lanterns were pretty slow, but they coordinated pretty well in such a large group.

Pew!

I fired off an eighteen-inch-diameter Stone Bullet. It shot through the air and smashed through one of the pumpkin heads. The monster sagged and toppled to the ground.

“Huh, looks like their heads are their weak spot.”

That would speed things up. I decided to try knocking 'em out in one fell swo—whoa?!

A grey light flashed beside me and some kind of sphere flew past my ear. I did

a quick backstep and barely dodged. Was that the Depression Canon? The really scary thing was that there didn't seem to be a tell before it fired.

I counterattacked with another Stone Bullet, and the jack-o'-lantern ducked. Bad news for me—apparently these creatures learned pretty fast.

There wasn't anything else I could do, so I grabbed my sword. The enemies were slow, so I slashed it with my blade and cut it neatly in two.

"Grr..." The creature let out a little groan as it sank into the ground. My sword really was sharp.

Two-edged Blade: Grade A Skills: Sharp Edge; Good Luck

I'd refashioned this sword myself, though it had come with the skill Sharp Edge, which greatly increased its cutting ability.

"Garh!"

"This is too easy."

The third one tried to get away with the same attack pattern. I handily dodged and cut it down. Magic was all well and good, but there was just something satisfying in taking out monsters with a sword. It was fantastic stress relief.

I took a moment to check on the other two. There really wasn't anything to say about Luna but, well, that was par for the course. She fired off lightning-quick volleys of Energy Shots from her magical firearm. The monsters had no time to react and she hit all three she'd aimed at. Orange light tore through the jack-o'-lanterns' heads, sending their similarly colored insides flying in all directions.

Luna sometimes lost consciousness if she used too much magic, but she was diligently conserving her power and so far had pulled off everything without a hitch.

"That's our Luna."

"You're not too shabby yourself," she said. "Lady Emma should be about finished with her portion, too."

“Yeah.”

Emma let out a shout as she sliced up the two remaining jack-o'-lanterns with her new daggers. She could use wind magic, too, so Emma was a specialist in close and midrange combat. I had similar strengths, but Luna was more of a mid to long-range combatant.

With all eight creatures defeated, the three of us high-fived.

“But, man, I was only up against two of them, and it still took me the longest...” Emma said.

“Don’t worry about it. This isn’t a race.”

“I’m just clearly weaker than you both.”

“So how about I give you a new skill once I have enough LP?” I asked. “I think something in the wind element would suit you, so it probably won’t be too expensive, either.”

“I don’t want you to *just* give me a new skill. Here, let me help you earn more LP! Is there anything I can do?”

“I’ll help, too,” said Luna.

I was happy for their assistance, but I wasn’t sure what they could do. I considered asking the Great Sage, but questions related to LP tended to give me a killer headache.

“So this is just a random idea,” I said, “but...what if you both give me a hug at the same time?”

“Like how?”

“Like if one of you hugs me from the front, and the other from the back, like sandwiching me in the middle?”

“Okay, sure!” said Emma.

“I’m a little embarrassed, but...” said Luna.

“Y-yeah, maybe we shouldn’t.”

“But I’m gonna do my best!”

Wait, you're gonna do it?! Well, I couldn't complain.

At any rate, the two of them embraced me.

"How's this, Noir?" Emma asked.

"A-are we doing it right?"

"Hngh, ahh, this feels pretty nice..."

It was so warm, and the two of them smelled so nice, I was feeling a little giddy. I felt like the ham in a ham sandwich! As I enjoyed myself, I checked my LP and I'd earned an extra 300 from the act.

"Thank you, Emma, Luna. I got my LP—hey, watch out, Emma!"

"Huh?"

One of the jack-o'-lanterns must have survived—no, it was a new one that had been hiding behind a gravestone. It fired its Depression Canon at Emma's back—and hit.

"Eeek!"

"That damn monster!" Luna jumped into action and took out the jack-o'-lantern with an Energy Shot.

After that, we made sure to double-check our surroundings, but it didn't seem like there were any more surprises.

"Emma, are you okay?"

"I just...wanna die."

"Huh? You want to...die?"

Emma sank to the ground with a gloomy expression and started writing in the dirt with her finger: "Life is too hard."

"This seems like an effect of that attack."

"Makes sense, given the name."

"Ahh," Emma moaned. "Nothing good will ever happen if I keep on living, maybe I should just kill myself."

"Wait! Emma, snap out of it!"

Luna and I restrained Emma as she put one of her daggers to her throat.

“Please let me go. There’s nothing for me in this world but despair.”

“That’s not true!” I protested. “The world is full of light. I’m positive lots of good things will happen, and plenty of things can make you feel better.”

“Like what? I dare you to do something, anything, to make me feel better.”

“Okay, how about I stroke your hair? There, there.”

Normally Emma would yell at me for treating her like a child, but in the throes of the Depression Cannon, she just smiled and seemed to enjoy the attention. Kind of like a cat.

“Ahh...you’re right...I do feel a little happier. Ahh, but it won’t last for the rest of my life, so I really should just die after all.”

“Ngh, how is it so powerful?!”

“Lady Emma must have been especially susceptible,” said Luna. “It doesn’t take much to disturb a pubescent girl’s mental state.”

“What should we do?”

“If we wait, it should get better on its own. Keyword: should. Personally, I think it’d be best to take her back to the guild to heal her with magic or find some medicine.”

“What kind of magic works on this?” I asked.

“For something like this I’d say Panacea.”

I looked into it with Get Creative. There were C-through S-Grade variations of that skill. Thanks to Emma and Luna’s help, my family, and Ms. Elena’s contribution, I had over 1,000 LP.

The B-Grade version and above required over 1,000 LP, which was a bit much. The C-Grade one was only 500, though, which was manageable.

“Will the weakest version of the spell be enough to cure her?”

“I believe so.”

“It seems like it’ll be useful in the future, too, so I’ll go for it.”

I spent the LP to Bestow Panacea on myself at C-Grade. I touched Emma and activated the skill. I felt my palms heat up, but it was a pleasant warmth. As I went to confirm whether it'd worked, Emma's expression did a 180.

"Huh? Something feels, like, really nice."

"Do you still want to die and stuff?"

"Not at all! I felt really rough there for a sec, though. I wonder what that was about."

Luna and I let out a sigh of relief. Emma was back to her usual self. The negativity really didn't suit her.

"Hey, Noir, stroke my hair~!"

"But you're better already."

"Oh no, I think I want to die again..."

I could tell she was faking, but I pretended to be taken in. "We can't have that now, can we? There you go."

"Hm, I guess I don't need to die after all."

Both of us were sixteen years old, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a little ridiculous.

Chapter 10:

Everything Is Going Swimmingly

IT WOULD BE NIGHT SOON, so I couldn't keep fooling around with Emma forever. The three of us collected materials from the jack-o'-lanterns.

18× Jack-o'-lantern Hands (Grade C) 18× Jack-o'-lantern Feet (Grade C)

We only needed ten hands for the request. We'd probably sell off the rest later, so I tucked them away in my Pocket Dimension.

"Sir Noir, that's a terribly convenient skill."

"There are C to S-Grade variants. Mine's only C-Grade, but it's still about as big as a room."

"Incredible," said Luna. "You'll have plenty of space as long as we don't take down an especially large monster."

"Especially large...?"

I hadn't thought about that. If we took down a dragon, there would likely be plenty of useful parts. There were a number of larger creatures in the hidden dungeon too. I needed to increase the grade on my Pocket Dimension the next time I had some extra LP.

"What's up, Emma? Why are you staring at that jack-o'-lantern head?"

"I was just thinking, like...could you eat this?"

"What?"

"Like I said, would you try eating it?"

"Oh, I get it."

They were technically pumpkins. More importantly, the ways I could earn LP were: consuming particularly delectable food; engaging in sexual activity with attractive members of the opposite sex; fulfilling a desire for financial or material gain; or satisfying any other basic desires (including the production of offspring).

But there were some particularly easy ways to earn some extra LP, like eating unsettling-yet-delicious food items or going on a shopping spree.

“I think I’ll ask my mother to cook it.”

It didn’t seem to be poisonous, so I tucked the head away in my Pocket Dimension and the three of us headed back.

“I shouldn’t have expected any less from you, Mr. Noir! You cleared that request in no time.” Lola brought her hands together in joy, wearing the biggest smile.

We sold off the rest of the jack-o’-lantern parts and were paid for fulfilling the request. Even after we split the proceeds, I ended up with thirty thousand rels. I was still occasionally bowled over with gratitude for how I’d been able to pull myself and my family out of poverty and increase our standard of living. I could buy LP with money too, so it had plenty of uses. All the more reason to keep earning!

“So, about your next request...”

“Got anything good for us?”

“We have a series of holidays coming up the day after tomorrow, is the Hero Academy off?”

“Yup.”

We had two days off for the gods’ birthday and it lined up with two normal days off, giving us a four-day weekend.

“Then why not go on a bit of an expedition and take out some thieves? It’ll be worth quite a lot of points.”

“Huh. I mean, I’m totally cool with that.”

Emma and Luna had no objections either, so Lola continued.

“It’s a request from the head of Amon Village. He wants to be rid of the thieves that keep looting the village. But there are two complicating factors. First: a round trip to Amon Village takes about three days.”

So basically, to get it done over a four-day weekend, we’d have to finish the

job and head back in one day. I had an idea for how to handle that, however.

“I was thinking, maybe I could ask Tigerson to help get us there and back.”

“That’s an excellent idea!” said Lola “You’re always so quick-witted, Mr. Noir.”

“Oh, you flatter me.”

“You’re such a dummy, Noir,” Emma muttered. “Wipe that stupid grin off your face.”

I did as Emma instructed and asked about the second issue.

“This particular request was given a D-Grade classification,” said Lola, “but honestly, I think it could easily be C-Grade. There are some powerful monsters called magic eaters living near Amon village. Promise me that if you encounter one, you’ll run.”

The request had been on the books for over ten days. Those powerful monsters were likely the reason why no one had taken it yet.

“The low compensation probably isn’t helping matters...” I said.

If the village wasn’t particularly wealthy, they probably didn’t have much to offer. I felt bad for them. And anyway, you know...there had to be kids in Amon.

“I’ll take it. If it’ll get us closer to going up a grade, it’ll be more than worth it. Plus...I kinda feel like I can’t *not* help.”

Lola gave me a tender look. “You really are a good person, Mr. Noir. A lot of adventurers are only concerned with material gain and their own safety.”

“Sir Noir proved he was a man of honor when he assisted Lady Maria,” said Luna. “If nothing else, I intend to assist him as his friend.”

There was no better feeling than having the trust of a friend. Luna tried to clasp my hand but Lola and Emma chopped their way between us.

“Where do you get off trying to casually score points like that, Luna? I’m going to have to have a talk with you later. As a *friend*.”

“Ms. Luna, you really overstepped there.”

“L-Look, don’t chop me at full force!”

“Shut up!” Lola and Emma shouted with overwhelming force.

Luna fell silent. I was starting to worry for the village we were supposed to help... At any rate, we accepted the request. Our vacation started in two days, so we had a bit of time to prepare.

After we parted ways, I headed straight home. I couldn't help but smile when Tigerson ran up to greet me.

<I have been waiting for you for ages, Noir!> “Sorry about that, I had a request to take care of.”

<I see. I suppose you had no choice, then. Well, remember, I cannot say “no” to you, No-ir.> “You tell jokes now, Tigerson?”

<Your father is a great teacher.> I glanced into the living room, where my father was cheering and flashing a peace sign with a smug look on his face. I pretended not to see.

“My father's sense of humor is a little dubious, so you might want to use his jokes sparingly.”

<Hm, is that so?>

I went in to greet my parents, then gave my mother the jack-o'-lantern pumpkin and asked her to cook it for me.

“Interesting... I believe I could stew it and make a simple soup. Though if you don't mind it taking a while, I could make it extra special.”

“Regular is fine by me!”

My mother was a good cook, but sometimes she overthought it and got ambitious, and then she'd produce something really, uh, experimental, shall we say... But when she just gave in to her skills, she made delicious food that was always juuust right.

“Why don't you go get Alice for dinner? She's upstairs.”

“Got it.”

I headed upstairs and knocked on my sister's door, but she didn't answer. Maybe she was asleep.

“I’m coming in.”

I opened the door, but Alice was nowhere to be found. Maybe she was in my room...? My suspicions were confirmed. I eased open my door and found Alice curled up on my bed.

“Zzz zzzz...brother dearest...”

“Hey, what are you doing?”



“Wha?!”

She let out an uncharacteristic squeak as she shot up out of bed. When she met my eyes, she trembled. Why was she so scared...?

“I came to get you for dinner...”

“Y-y-y-y-you’re home?”

“Yeah, I just got back. So, what are you doing?”

“I, uh...I was fixing your sheets.”

“Looks more like you were doing the opposite.”

My bed was pretty obviously unmade. Alice went pale and started babbling incoherently. I decided not to question it. She must’ve had her own reason. I mean, Alice was in the habit of doing all sorts of weird things, like that time she snuck into my room and sat in a corner until morning.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “You can keep napping.”

“Huh? Um, b-b-brother dearest...” Alice stuttered as I lay down next to her. “Uh, um, what...?”

“Just relax. We’re brother and sister, there’s nothing weird about this.”

“O-oh. Okay!”

We used to sleep together like this all the time when we were kids, so I hunkered down for a nap. When I woke up a bit later and checked my LP, it looked like I’d earned a little from it, too—score!

While I was celebrating, my door suddenly opened.

“You’re late for dinner! Were you two saying bad things about your fa—oh. Excuse me.” As usual, my father completely misinterpreted what was going on. He spun around and left the room. I could hear him screaming out in the hall. “Honeeeeeey! This is real bad! Real, real bad!”

Well, he always jumped to conclusions like that. This was basically an everyday occurrence at the Stardia household. I headed downstairs, explained what was really going on to my mother, and sat down for dinner.

It turned out that the jack-o'-lantern pumpkin was the heavenly kind of delicious. I wasn't sure if it was just my mother's cooking ability, but the stewed version was much softer, sweeter, and more flavorful than regular pumpkin. The soup was outstanding too. I wondered if this was one of the ones I'd taken out with a Stone Bullet. Either way, I had a fantastic meal and earned 500 LP, so I was more than satisfied.

I'd been contemplating it for a while, but it occurred to me that there were probably a lot of other edible monsters. Seeing as I could earn LP from them, I decided to try more of the things in the future.

At any rate, it was the end of a truly amazing day. I decided to make a point to visit my master again after class the following one.

Chapter 11:

Bullseye

THE HERO ACADEMY had high academic standards. That was what everyone said, and I had to agree. There were a ton of hands-on lessons, especially with Ms. Elena. The morning before my party's assignment in Amon Village, my class was in combat training.

"If you want to assess your own abilities, you use a Discerning Item. Isn't that obvious?" said Ms. Elena. "But one assessment is insufficient, because people grow over the course of their lives."

In other words, you needed to rely on such an item to confirm whether you were actually making progress.

"Normally, they're quite expensive, but luckily for you lot, you're mostly from rich families. I would recommend evaluating yourself once every two weeks if possible, and once a month at least."

Ms. Elena knew I had Discerning Eye, but if she mentioned it to the class, everyone would rush to me, so she took care to keep it on the down low.

"But enough of that. Today I want you to try using a stone or knife or what-have-you to hit that target."

A round target was set up in front of us. It wasn't much taller than we were, and it consisted of several concentric rings with numbers written in them. The middle circle was 100 points, the one just outside of it was 70, then 50, and so on.

"You will stand at a distance of fifteen yards. It's a little far, but you should be able to manage that with a stationary target. Give it a shot, one at a time."

Everyone lined up. A surprising number of my classmates didn't hit the target at all, though it might have been a different story if they could have used magic.

"Unacceptable. You're not throwing hard enough. You could be throwing your weapons until the sun set and you'd still never hit the target."

Ms. Elena started to coach us on our form. She seemed kind of frustrated. I guess we were even worse than she expected. I really didn't want to deal with her when she was in such a state. But luckily for me, something turned her mood around.

Fwa-shing!

A girl who threw a knife with a practiced hand, hitting the bullseye.

"Spectacular," said Ms. Elena. "You're an expert."

"I've been training since I was a kid."

"You should keep at it and continue honing your skills."

"I will."

I used Discerning Eye on the girl. She had C-Grade Throwing. I looked into it for myself and saw it was one of those graded skills.

Throwing (Grade C) — 250 LP

Throwing (Grade B) — 500 LP

Throwing (Grade A) — 1,000 LP

Throwing (Grade S) — 2,500 LP

I'd been diligently earning LP, so I currently had around 1,500. I could pick up the A-Grade variant without issue, but I wasn't so focused on throwing in my day-to-day. Better to choose between C or B. I really would have liked to consult my master about how best to use my LP on this matter, but in the end I opted to go with C-Grade. That girl seemed to manage just fine with it, after all. Of course, generating the skill wouldn't give me any practical experience, so I wasn't expecting to be able to throw as well as her right away.

"Next, Noir."

"Yes, ma'am."

I selected a knife and tried throwing with my own power.

Fwip! Yeah, that didn't work. It didn't get anywhere near the target.

"Noir...you aren't very good at this, are you?"

"You can say that again..."

"First, you need to fix your form. Stand like this." Ms. Elena got close to arrange my arms and legs. So close, in fact, that my classmates started whispering.

"Aren't they a little friendly?"

"Seriously. She didn't get that up close and personal with us..."

Ms. Elena and I were a little startled. She always gave me hugs in exchange for those shoulder massages, so we hadn't realized we were unusually close—I didn't feel weird at all.

"Hey, you two over there, no talking," she snapped at the whispering students.

"S-sorry."

"Now you try throwing again," she said to me.

"Y-yes, ma'am."

I threw the knife, but once more, I missed.

"Don't let it get you too down. You did much better than your first attempt."

She wasn't wrong, I did get a lot closer the second time. Satisfied that I had a good handle on my natural ability, I produced the C-Grade Throwing skill and tried again.

"Whoa, h-how did you...?"

My knife landed right in the bullseye. Skill assists really are the best.

"You did it!"

"That's Mr. Noir for you. I shall work hard to catch up to you."

Emma and Maria praised me. It seemed like Throwing could prove useful in the future, so I didn't regret buying it.

The higher-grade versions of Throwing improved the speed, force, and

accuracy of your shots. It also let you use less effort to throw heavier objects, and the S-Grade version could change an object's trajectory midair. How terrifying. I decided to upgrade it when I had the opportunity.

Just as I'd planned, I went to the hidden dungeon after class. On the first floor, I took out a cute little golden slime. Their bodies were useful raw materials as well as food. I savored it as I ate. It was just a sweet jelly, but it earned me a small amount of LP.

The amount of LP seemed to be related to my emotional reaction, so first experiences netted me the most. The first-time effect was remarkably pronounced when it came to food. In contrast, fooling around with girls earned LP at a more consistent rate. Maybe my palate just got bored easily. At any rate, I headed down to the second floor to see my master.

<Happy birthday, Noir!>

My master was still strung up with the Death Chains, but she seemed to be in an especially good mood.

"Which Noir are you talking about? It's not my birthday."

<You're no fun. I just felt like celebrating something. Not many have earned the blessing of the great Olivia.>

"It sounds more like you weren't very interested in other people in the past."

<That mighta been part of it. I think you might be the first person I've ever cared this much about...>

Teasing me was practically a greeting, so I brushed her off. She reminded me of my father in some respects, although unlike him, my master had become something of a legendary figure.

<What are you up to today? I can't imagine you're planning on chatting with li'l old Olivia all morning.>

"Sorry to disappoint, but I intend to make it through the seventh floor today."

<What happened with that black lion?>

“He’s living at my house now. He stands guard. I guess I could ask him to help me explore the dungeon, but he’s so big, it’d probably get difficult to navigate at some point.”

The corridors on the sixth floor were pretty narrow. Plus, not being able to use Dungeon Elevator would have been a total pain—its area of effect was small, and I wasn’t confident Tigerson would be able to fit through the hole it made.

<My intuition is telling me that you’re going to find some kind of treasure on the next level.>

“What makes you think that?”

<I’ve been through my fair share of dungeons, and it’s common for good drops to show up on the seventh floor.>

“Huh.”

Her advice was usually reliable, and my heart pounded in anticipation, although I was concerned that a bigger prize might mean more difficult obstacles. I mean, real life doesn’t have bonus stages loaded with nothing but rewards.

To help me prep, Olivia asked me about my current LP and skills, so I told her I had the following: Great Sage; Get Creative; Bestow; Editor; LP Conversion; LP Conversion—Money; Discerning Eye; Discerning Eye for Items; Headache Immunity; Pocket Dimension (Grade C); Dungeon Elevator; Stone Bullet; Holy Flame; Exorcism; Excavate; Improved Back Step; Passive Defense; Blinding Light; Magical Fusion; Deodorize; Lucky Lecher; Shoulder Rub; Night Vision; Panacea (Grade C); and Throwing (Grade C).

<You really don’t have a lot of LP, huh? I led such a hedonistic life that I always had tens of thousands to spare!>

“I think you’re almost a little too honest, Master...”

<You should try stepping out of your comfort zone.>

“That’s easier said than done. I’m just a normal, healthy boy after all.”

<I guess I’ll have to give you some ‘normal’ advice then.>

“Please do.”

From there, she proceeded to tell me where my weak points were, based on my skills, and I listened intently.

Chapter 12:

Forest of Gold

I STILL DIDN'T HAVE very much LP, but I wanted to produce some more useful skills, so I asked my master for advice.

<I have plenty of recs, but I think it'd be a good idea to have basic attacks in each of the four elements first. All you have so far is Holy Flame, so you still need wind, lightning, and water. Of those three, water's the most important! Humans need water to live, after all.>

She recommended Water Drop. Not only could it produce potable water, you could stun enemies by firing it at them. It was only 250 LP, so I snagged it. At maximum, it produced a drop that was a foot in diameter.

"I could Edit Water Drop to increase the size limit, couldn't I?"

<No, dummy! You should Edit it to be able to generate sea water, too! The salt makes it more effective against enemies than regular water.>

I went and took a look.

Water Drop: Creates a drop of fresh water. The diameter may vary between approximately four and twelve inches. Droplets may also be fired.

I tried adding "or sea water" after the words "fresh water." It would cost 100 LP and, since that wasn't too expensive, I went ahead and did it.

<Next, I'd suggest Lightning Strike. You can fire a lightning elemental attack from your fingers. You'd be surprised by how far you can get with it.>

This one was only 250 LP, so I went for that too. However, the skill did have one drawback: its range wasn't very large.

<That's what Editor is for!>

I Edited that one more like I had with Stone Bullet. The description said that

lightning-based attacks had a range of one to six inches. I tried changing “inches” to “yards,” but that required 500 LP. Bit much, you know? But dropping it to three yards was only 150. Still, I decided to save my remaining LP.

<That’s fine. You’re good for now. I picked Water Drop and Lightning Strike because they’re strong on their own, but they become even more powerful when combined.>

“Oh, with Magical Fusion, right?!”

<Yup. Fresh water doesn’t conduct electricity very well; that’s why I told you to make that Edit, kiddo!>

My master took all sorts of things into account when it came to combat. She’d really earned her reputation as a legendary adventurer. I was lucky to have the opportunity to learn from her.

With only about 500 LP left, I decided to call it quits on acquiring new skills at present. It’d take some time to get the hang of my new skills anyway. My master gave me some additional guidance, then I set out for the seventh floor.

First, I used Dungeon Elevator to return to the sixth floor. It was as dark as it was last time, but since I had Night Vision now, I could progress with little trouble. Then a zombie split into six parts burst into view.

“Gaaaarh...”

“Okay, I get it, please die already.”

“Gaaaarh!”

I burned it to a crisp with Holy Flame. That was apparently worth a lot of experience, because I went up a level too. The enemies in the hidden dungeon were, as a general rule, fonts of experience. I was already close to Level 60. I decided I’d make Level 100 my next big goal.

And there it was! The stairs down to the seventh floor. I descended with due caution.

“This seems a little long.”

I’d taken several hundred steps down with no end in sight. Then things suddenly opened up and got brighter.

“A...forest?”

I finally reached the ground and found myself in the middle of a forest. The ceiling looked like the sky, and there was even fake sunlight. I was unsure if it was an illusion, or was it just a trick of the light. At any rate, it was like a normal forest, bursting with trees, shrubs, and all manner of greenery. I could even hear cicadas chirping, and it was wonderfully warm. It was summer incarnate.

“Is that...a rhinoceros beetle?”

A golden rhinoceros beetle climbed up a tree trunk. It sparkled so brightly that I thought it might be gilded. I snatched it up—what poor noble would pass up something like that?

I hesitated before putting it away in my Pocket Dimension. The thought of killing the beetle in the vacuum of that special plane was unsettling, so I tucked it into a bag at my waist, then went back to hunting for gold.

That beetle seemed rare, so I wasn't expecting to find any others, but then a silver stag beetle walked into view! I grabbed for it.

“Ouch!”

Even as it pinched me as hard as it could, I shoved it into the bag. I hoped it wouldn't fight with the other one. They were almost certainly worth a pretty penny. Could they be the treasure my master speculated was down here?

I became engrossed in collecting the beetles. After a few hours, I'd collected fourteen of them and was feeling extremely pleased with myself.

“Yeah! Good job, me. It might be about time to call it quits for today.”

I knew I couldn't overextend myself. I was invested in both my own safety and my wellbeing, so I decided to leave for the day.

“I'll be back, seventh floor!”

I bid the forest farewell, activated my Dungeon Elevator skill, and jumped in—only to feel an intense impact against my side. I cried out as I was knocked away. My side was agony, but it didn't seem like I'd sustained any serious damage.

I scrambled up and realized what had happened: I was rammed by a giant

golden pillbug. “Giant” might be a bit misleading, admittedly. The thing was dwarfed by the giant ants and snakes on the fifth floor. It was about three feet long, and its whole body sparkled. It looked impossibly rare.

Name: Golden Pillbug

Level: 113

Skills: Somersault Attack; Slash Resistance (Grade B)

And it was incredibly powerful! The first thing that popped into my mind was “run away!” I was such a coward... But my Dungeon Elevator had already vanished, and I wouldn’t be able to create another one for an hour. If I wanted to flee, I’d have to rely on my legs.

Fight or flight? I’d defeated plenty of more powerful enemies before. This one only had one offensive skill and it didn’t seem *that* dangerous. But I decided to run at first, you know, give myself some distance. I turned tail and bolted.

“Whoa! It’s fast!”

The pillbug curled up and shot forward, rolling at blinding speed to close the distance between us. I jumped up and it flew past beneath me, slamming into a tree.

The tree cracked and came crashing down, but the pillbug stretched out and targeted me again. Pillbug monsters were vicious.

I fired off a Stone Bullet about three feet in diameter. The yard-wide boulder smashed right into the bug. If it wasn’t dead, it definitely wouldn’t be able to move—or at least, I thought it wouldn’t. But the stone crumbled and it came for me yet again.

If that thing hit my leg, I’d have a compound fracture for sure. I leapt up like my life depended on it. This time it screeched to a stop before hitting a tree and whipped around to attack again.

There was no end to the assault. Frantically, I checked my range and fired off a Lightning Strike. Purple lightning shot out from my outstretched fingertips. I

made a direct hit on the pillbug and it suddenly unfurled. It slid along the ground, twitching. Yes! It worked.

“I wonder what I should do with this thing.”

I drew my sword and swung down on where I thought the pillbug's neck might be, but the blade bounced off with a ka-chink. No way, right...? That B-Grade Slash Resistance had to have a pretty significant effect on blades. I mean, I had Sharp Edge on my sword, for crying out loud. Not to be discouraged, I brought down my blade again.

This time, I felt it sink into the creature's flesh. It didn't go very deep though, so I pulled my blade back out and tried again. After several strikes, I lopped its head off. Then it occurred to me that it might have been easier if I'd flipped it over.

“So it rolls up to attack, not just protect itself. What a terrifying enemy.”

But thanks to that encounter, I went up another level. My next question was whether to harvest its parts. There weren't any creatures like it outside, so it seemed like it'd be hard to sell without earning suspicion.

At any rate, I didn't really like looking at it, so I left the parts where they were. I needed to go home and figure out what to do with these metallic beetles. Just the thought of how much I could sell them for brought a smile to my face.

Chapter 13:

You Can't Let Your Guard Down on the Seventh Floor

I WAS SO HAPPY when I found the staircase leading back up to the sixth floor that I started skipping. But when I got closer, I froze—a shrub near me was rustling. As I got closer, I saw the culprit: a silver wolf. And not just one, but a whole pack. Six, no, seven of them were fighting over a corpse. I was in trouble.

The silver wolves might not have looked all that different from regular wolves, but their shimmering, silver coats suggested they were far from normal creatures. They were obviously monsters, but I used my Discerning Eye to be sure. They were all pretty similar, but the one that seemed to be the leader was the most dangerous.

Name: Silver Wolf

Level: 158

Skills: Sharp Fangs; Reflexes (Grade C); Agility (Grade C); Leadership

Not only were they stronger than that pillbug, they were in a group. Things couldn't be worse. I held my breath and tried to put some distance between us. I wasn't even confident I could handle one of them. Taking on a whole pack was pure insanity. When I got to a safe distance, I let out a sigh of relief.

The hidden dungeon was nothing to laugh at. The wolves were still working on their carcass, so they'd likely stay put for a while. It was too dangerous to try to head back up the stairs until they were finished. I'd just have to wait it out on the seventh floor until I could use my Dungeon Elevator skill again.

Or maybe, since I was stuck on the seventh floor anyway, I could look for the stairs down to the eighth. However, this floor was less a dungeon level and more of a forest. There were all sorts of plants and animals, and it'd be easy to

miss the staircase. That meant it was the perfect time to use my secret weapon!

Great Sage, where are the stairs to the eighth floor of this dungeon?

<I haven't the faintest.>

Blunt much? Though, I had a feeling I'd get an answer like that. They say the hidden dungeons were given to us by the gods. I should have expected that the stairs couldn't be sensed, even with this generally excellent skill. While the Great Sage knew a great deal, he didn't know everything. He was particularly useless when it came to personal information. I once got basically the same answer when I asked it what Emma was keeping secret from me. I couldn't rely on it *too* much.

On the positive side, I hardly had a headache, so I kept moving in the opposite direction from the wolves. I noticed other animal tracks as I went, so there were no doubt as many animals here as in any other forest. As such, I wasn't surprised when another golden pillbug appeared.

It rolled out, looked me in the eye, and launched straight into one of those Somersault Attacks. The thing about this particular attack was that, while it could rip through trees and shrubs once it got going, it wasn't really that powerful at the start of its roll. Last time around, I didn't even suffer any serious injuries. I got proactive and knocked the wind out of its sails with a Lightning Strike.

You know what's important? Learning from your mistakes. I flipped the electrocuted pillbug over and thrust my sword right through its underbelly. It only took me one stroke to split it in two. It reminded me that I really had to adapt my strategy to each specific monster.

I continued on the path. After a while, the repetitive scenery started to make me feel a little dizzy. I had no idea where I was going, and then I heard some kind of rumbling crash. Just ahead, a pair of those pillbugs were locked in battle.

Maybe I was in pillbug territory or something. I hid and watched. The pillbugs crashed into each other with Somersault Attacks, pushed each other back, and attacked again. Could it be a turf war? Then one of them ran out of stamina and unrolled and—splat! Pillbug everywhere. It was revolting.

But the winner seemed to be exhausted too, because it stopped moving. I took that as my cue, ran up from behind, and kicked it over.

“Hiyah!”

Another one down! Once I delivered the finishing blow, I ran away—a hit and run of sorts. You need to be pretty tough to live as a dungeon seeker, after all.

“This really is exhausting.”

I found a group of trees to lean against and take a breather. I just needed to hold out a little longer, until I could use my Dungeon Elevator skill to escape.

I checked to make sure the beetles were still in my bag. Thankfully, they weren’t fighting with each other. Secure in that, at least, I started to nod off. Maybe it was just relief from escaping all those enemies, or maybe the twittering birds lulled me to sleep.

I had a dream where Luna and Emma were tickling me. I pleaded with them to stop, but then Lola and Alice joined in. Was I always ticklish there?

Suddenly, I woke up.

“Huh?”

I wasn’t immediately sure what was going on. Why was I floating?

My arms were wrapped around a branch and my body was hanging from it... and at the base of the branch was an open mouth, with fangs like some kind of predator. It was trying to eat me.

“Wait, is that a monster?!”

I used my Discerning Eye. It was called a killer tree—either the thing was haunted, or it had always been some kind of monster. In any case, thankfully for me, it was only Level 20. Not that I was in any position to take it easy.

I frantically held open the creature’s mouth with my legs and struggled to keep it from closing. Branches wrapped around my wrists, but my fingers were still free, so I fired off Holy Flame.

Bark singed and leaves crisped. It did a ton of damage! The branches released me and, as I landed, I used Magical Fusion to fire a Flaming Stone Bullet into the

tree's gaping mouth.

It seemed painful, because the branches flailed violently until the killer tree suddenly stopped moving. I was afraid of starting a forest fire, so I used Water Drop to extinguish it.

Ugh. I'd really screwed up there. I had to remember that not all enemies were that obvious. I resolved to use my Discerning Eye before resting next time.

I'd used quite a bit of magic by then, so I was feeling even more tired. Luckily, it was near the time that I could finally use my Dungeon Elevator skill again.

"Given your great strength, I have a request to make of you."

"Excuse me?"

That was the only answer I could muster. When I came to my senses and turned around, no one was there. Or at least, I didn't think there was, until I lowered my gaze and found a girl of about seven or eight. She was so adorable I instinctively dropped my guard, even though the seventh floor of a hidden dungeon really wasn't the sort of place where a normal, innocent little girl should be.

As such, I used my Discerning Eye on her and I found some information that should have been obvious—yes, indeed, this girl was not human.

Chapter 14:

Little Dory's Wish

I FELT A STRANGE SENSE of nostalgia when I looked at the young girl. I could tell that she'd grow up to be a real beauty, and even at her young age she had the elegance of high nobility. Her beautiful, straight hair looked like it was made of spun gold. She had clear skin, long eyelashes, and a lovely face. She looked like a human, and her name was Dryade. But she wasn't human at all. When I used Discerning Eye on humans or other humanoids, it gave me their age, species, and occupation, but I got none of those for her.

Name: Dryade

Level: 55

Skills: Forest Sensitivity

I was a little relieved to see she didn't have any horrific skills. Also, her level was pretty low compared to the pillbugs and those silver wolves.

"Given your great strength, I have a request to make of you," she repeated.

She seemed to be growing impatient with me. I still didn't sense any enmity, but I took a few steps back just to be safe. "That's a pretty big ask out of the blue."

"Please, at this rate, I'll die."

"Oh, come on, you can't just pop up and put something like that on me."

"Please, I'm desperate. I'll do anything you ask." The little girl fell flat on her face and spread out her arms and legs. She really was a strange one.

"Wh-what's that supposed to be?"

"It's the physical expression of complete surrender, to demonstrate that one bears no ill will."

How was I supposed to respond to that? She really did seem to be in trouble, so I figured I should at least hear her out. "Okay, I'll listen, but look, I'm not

making any promises.”

“Ahhh, thank you so much!”

“Hold on! Stay away from me!”

“Oh, I’m sorry...”

Okay, yeah, I was probably being a little paranoid after my run-in with that killer tree. “Just talk. I’ll attack if you pull any funny business.”

“Understood, but I really don’t intend you any harm. May I speak?”

“Go ahead.”

“My name is Dryade, and I am a great tree of this forest.”

A tree? I cocked my head to the side, puzzled, and she spun around in place.

“This body is merely a projection. I have taken this form to better match your own.”

“We’ve never met before, have we...?”

“Indeed, we have not. But I know of your strength, and you seem like someone I could negotiate with.”

“Where exactly did you see my ‘strength’?”

“I know this forest well. I see all that happens within it.”

That must’ve been an effect of her Forest Sensitivity skill. Things were starting to make more sense. She’d probably been observing me since I set foot on the seventh floor, and when she saw that I had more power of reason than the monsters, she decided to come to me for help with whatever it was she needed. I was curious, to be honest, but I had some other things I needed to confirm.

“Can you read my mind?”

“No?”

“So you just randomly picked that form?”

“I did. But you do appear to be rather fond of it.”

Hey! I’m no pervert! my heart wanted to shout, but it wasn’t the time or the

place. I was genuinely impressed, when I thought about it. Dryade looked exactly like Emma had when she was a kid. That explained that weird feeling of nostalgia.

“Get to the point. What’s bothering you?”

“I’m being sucked dry.”

“Uh, come again?”

“I’m being drained to the bone.”

Dryade wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed tight. Why that pose all of a sudden? I had to wonder. She glanced up at me, seeing that she had me properly rattled.

“Filthy, awful creatures...are gobbling me up! Eek!”

“You’re just messing with me now, aren’t you!”

“I was just accurately describing the dire reality of my situation.”

I was positive she was exaggerating, although she didn’t seem to be lying about being attacked.

“I live by extracting nutrients from the earth. Trees may not be able to walk, but we are abundant in magic. And those nasty monsters assault me day in and day out to try to get it for themselves!”

“Dryade, this sounds like an extreme nonproblem.”

“It’s a very real problem-problem!”

“Really?”

“Anyway, please help me.”

“Would you quit it with that pose?”

Her lying flat on her face on the ground thing was getting old. I helped her up and wiped the dirt off her clothes and face.

“Hm. You seem to be a genuinely kind person,” said Dryade. “So listen, I’m not asking you to do this for free. If you help me, I will tell you the location of a treasure chest.”

“A treasure chest, you say...”

“Also, I’ll tell you where the stairs are! You want to go further down, don’t you?”

Ah, right, her skill let her know everything about the forest. Of course she knew where the stairs were. And she was right, I *did* want treasure. She might not have been human, but she read me like a book. I pushed down the suspicion that I was being manipulated and tried to be more optimistic.

“I need to see what I’m dealing with before I agree.”

“How prudent.”

“Naw, I’m just a coward at heart.”

“Hm, I think we’re going to be good friends. Do you have a name?”

“Noir.”

“Then that is what I shall call you. You may call me Dory.” She picked up the hem of her skirt and spun around. She seemed to have taken a liking to this new form of hers. I had to admit it was a comforting one for me. If that was what she was going for, she was winning on grounds of psychological warfare.

The two of us hurried to the great tree in question. It wasn’t very far. On the way, Dory explained that her projected form was delicate, so we needed to avoid combat at all costs.

“Can you see it, Noir? It’s right over there.”

We were deep in the forest when Dory pointed ahead. There, a massive tree was rooted to the ground. It was overwhelmingly abundant with emerald green leaves. You could tell at a glance that it was something special. This was Dory’s real form.

“I can see what a fine tree you are even from a distance.”

“I appreciate the praise, but look carefully. Enemies abound.”

I got a little closer and squinted. It appeared that Dory could move her branches to some extent, and she was using them to try to fight off an enemy, specifically, a bee—a big one. Its whole body was gold and it was about two

feet long. But no matter how many branches Dory threw at it, the bee kept coming, largely unconcerned.

“There are monsters called bronze bees that live in this forest but, as you might guess, they’re bronze. I think that one must be a variation.”

I knew monsters could mutate. Most mutants were stronger than their typical variants, so some people called them “evolutions.”

“It seems to be alone, but it’s very persistent about sucking up my magic.”

“Let’s get a little closer.” I got near enough to use my Discerning Eye.

Name: Golden Bee Level: 254

Skills: High-Speed Flight; Intense Stinger; Slash Resistance (Grade C); Blunt Force Resistance (Grade C); Magic Absorption

Whoooooah! That thing was *strong*! Far stronger than I could have imagined. Emotionally speaking, I was instantly defeated.

“Noir, why is your face so pale?”

“Because all the blood drained from it...”

“Why are you trying to leave?”

“My feet just started moving on their own...”

“A-are you going?”

Dory looked like she was about to cry. AUGH, I couldn’t stand looking at her like that! It was such a human expression that I started to doubt whether she really was just a tree. I took a deep breath and confessed what I’d seen when I assessed the golden bee.

“Hmm... Would you rather I be gentle or exciting?” Dory asked.

“Gentle, please.”

“You’re definitely going to lose.”

“That’s what you call gentle?! Then what was the exciting version?”

“In that creature, you shall meet your death.”

“Ughhh!”

Honestly, I was more impressed that Dory was so impassive. The golden bee was small, relatively speaking, and it might not have been able to do anything aggressive while it was busy absorbing her magic, but it did have some other dangerous skills, so I wasn’t sure what to do.

“My life is almost over, though,” Dory murmured. She looked off into the distance with a calm expression on her face. It was the face of someone who had resigned herself to grim fate.

Ugh—no! I wanted to know where to find the stairs to the eighth floor, I wanted the treasure, and I wanted to save Dory. But reality wasn’t going to make that any kind of easy.

Please! Give me some heavenly inspiration to get out of this bind!

Chapter 15:

I'll Ask My Master

THE GOLDEN BEE pierced the tree's trunk with its stinger and began extracting its magic. Once it had been stung, the tree seemed to be in too much pain to keep counterattacking. Dory clutched her chest and sank to her knees. I stroked her back and, after a bit, the bee flew off, seemingly having gotten its fill.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yes...I'm feeling better for now. I don't think it'll be back for a few hours."

I gritted my teeth. I didn't stand a chance as I was. At a loss for what to do, I asked Dory, "How many more times could you endure that?"

"It depends on how much it takes. But if I'm lucky, two or three more times..."

But once she lost all her magic, she'd die, same as any being in this world. At best, the bee wouldn't be back for another half day, so maybe going back to the first floor and coming up with a plan was a good idea. But I had to leave on that expedition tomorrow, and leaving Dory now was tantamount to abandoning her. We had no time to spare. In any case, it was probably dark outside the dungeon, so I needed to spend the night here.

"I'll start by explaining my abilities," I said. I told her that I only had 500 LP at the moment, so I was potentially blocked off from the most effective methods possible.

"So, doing stuff with an attractive member of the opposite sex could help?"

"Yeah, but that might be a little hard under the circumstances."

"Am I no good? I am a woman right now."

I think "little girl" is more appropriate here. I told her it wouldn't work, but she insisted I try, so I gave in. We started with a princess carry.

Dory was low on magic and she wasn't super energetic, but she still smiled happily when I picked her up.

“Does this feel good?” she asked.

“I guess? I feel kind of like a knight to a little princess.”



“Well, I have a present for you, Sir Knight.”

She gave me a gentle peck on the cheek. I was surprised, but I thanked her and carried her over to her real body. I gently stroked the trunk of the tree.

“Can you feel this?”

“I can. Your gentle touch feels nice.”

“I know I look kind of wimpy,” I said. “But I give a mean massage.”

I ran my fingers over the tree a few times and Dory smiled at me warmly. It was such a calm moment it was hard to imagine I was fighting monsters to the death a mere hour before. I didn’t really have time to relax, but for some reason she put me at ease.

“So, did you earn some LP?”

“Look, I’m telling you, you’re so little it’s not going to—it worked?!”

No way. How did I get 800 LP from that? Was I a secret creep? The thought tormented me. Nooo, that couldn’t be it—pleasurable life experiences, right? Like having a kid? Especially one that looked kind of like how my daughter might if Emma were... Anyway, point being, I’d earned all that LP, so I had nothing to be upset about. If my master had been there, she would’ve teased the heck out of me for getting so worked up about it.

“Oh! That’s right! My master is here in this dungeon!” I exclaimed. Olivia had way more experience dealing with stuff like this. If anyone might have an idea, she would. “Dory, can you leave this place?”

“I can’t control my projection if it strays too far.”

“Okay, then wait for me. I’m going to go talk to my master. She’s up on the second floor. I’ll be back soon, I promise, so don’t do anything crazy.”

The forest was crawling with all sorts of dangerous monsters. Dory might just be a projection, but it was no doubt better if she didn’t get damaged.

“I’ll wait for you, Noir.”

“I promise I’ll be back.”

I could finally use my Dungeon Elevator skill again, so I did. Once on the

second floor, I went straight to my master's chamber.

"Master, I have a big problem."

<Well, hey, you came to the right place! I've been waiting for the moment when my sweet apprentice would come to his master for help!>

She always seemed to enjoy it when I came to visit. I could probably take a page from her every now and again. At any rate, I explained what was going on.

<I don't think I've ever seen a golden bee. The strongest bee I've encountered was probably a Level 700 poison bee.>

"S-seven hundred...? Did you beat it?"

<In one hit. Back in my heyday, no one stood a chance against me.>

"Wow. How did you do it?"

<I just used Bestow to increase its weight by a couple hundred pounds. It was too heavy to stay in the air, so it crashed to the ground and then I attacked it.>

"That's it?!"

<Yup. But sorry, I don't think you have the LP to pull that off right now.>

"Oh, yeah..."

<Personally, I think you should call it quits on this one,> she scolded in an unusually amused tone. *<I really don't want you to die, and I don't think you're in any position to go up against that bee directly.>*

The first problem was its Flight skill. That was bound to get annoying. There were High-Speed, Super High-Speed, and Hyper-Speed variations, and while it just had the lowest grade of the High-Speed variation, that made a big difference. It would make it hard for your average adventurer to even visually track it.

And then there was its other skill, Intense Stinger. It was a stronger version of basic Stinger and I probably wouldn't survive a single hit. Not only did it have lethal venom, it caused such intense pain it'd be impossible to counterattack. And to think Dory was so regularly stung...

"Huh, maybe I should make a poison immunity skill."

<Not a bad idea, but if you take it on directly, it's still gonna wallop you.>

"I guess my only option is to roll the dice, then."

<Not at all. That's not very like you, Noir. You're not one to throw up your hands and give up.> She let out a frustrated sigh and continued. *<It's not going to be risk-free, but I'll tell you a way to increase your chances of winning.>*

"That's why I like you, Master!"

<Tell me more! Praise me!>

"You're the best and the most beautiful, Master Olivia!"

<Well now I'm in a good mood, so sure, I'll tell you. How were things between the monsters in that forest? The different species probably didn't get along very well, right?> She was right. And it wasn't just different species; even the pillbugs were fighting with each other. *<Sooo, if you give the right critter a push in the right direction, they might do the job for you. Shall I give you my strategy, my apprentice?>*

"Yes, please."

I listened carefully to Olivia's directions. Once she finished, a spark of hope kindled in my heart. Of course, this wasn't a guaranteed win. If I screwed up, I could die...but it was definitely the best option. I went over the plan multiple times, and the hours flew by. At last, I stood.

"Well, I'm off."

<No dying on me, okay? I'll follow you to the depths of hell to beat your ass if you do.>

"Master, I'm pretty sure I'm headed the other direction after I die."

<Aw, then I won't be able to beat you up! Your master Olivia has been a very naughty girl, after all.>

When she got like this, the best option was just not to engage. I headed back to the seventh floor.

Chapter 16:

Monster vs. Monster

ONCE I GOT BACK to the seventh floor, I sped to Dory as fast as I could. She seemed to be resting, leaning up against her great tree. Her face brightened when she saw me, and her adorable smile warmed my heart.

“Sorry for taking so long.”

“I just knew you’d come back.”

“Of course! But more importantly, I think I have a plan.”

“Really?!”

“I can’t promise that it’ll work, but I can’t exactly let things keep going the way they have been, either.”

I had to do several things before I could get the ball rolling. I explained the procedure to Dory: I needed to Bestow a certain skill on the golden bee, so first I needed the bee around so I could figure out how much LP it would cost. Fortunately, my master predicted it wouldn’t be all that much. If I had enough LP right off the bat, I could proceed to having Dory help me find other monsters in the forest. Once I found those, I’d lead them to the bee and set off a chain reaction.

“First, we need to wait until the golden bee comes back.”

“That sounds kind of dangerous, Noir...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll stay safe. Plus, if this plan works, you’re going to reward me.”

“That’s right, I will. Treasure and stairs.”

“Yup. Ah, by the way, are you hungry? Wanna try some of this?” I pulled out some golden slime and gave her some. She was just a projection, but I was curious to see if she could eat—and figured that if she could, she should.

“Ohhh, it’s so sweet and delicious.”

“Right? You can find this stuff on the first floor. Though this dungeon never ceases to amaze...”

We went over the plan, confirming the location of various monsters. Dory’s Forest Sensitivity skill let her surveil the entire floor, so she knew where to find any and everything I might want. This was a major component of the strategy.

We waited by the tree for a few hours. It was definitely after dark outside by now. I realized my family and friends might be worried. I probably should have let them know that I might not be back until morning...

“It’s coming.”

“Finally.”

If I strained, I could hear the buzzing of the bee’s wings. The two of us approached Dory’s real body and concealed ourselves. I needed to be in pretty close range to be able to Bestow a skill.

The bee was zeroed in on the tree, so it didn’t notice us, and I immediately got to work. First: the skill Target cost 30 LP, and it made it easier for an enemy to be targeted when it was in a group. Essentially, it was a negative status effect, the kind of thing you’d turn down unless you were the type of person trying to get stronger through facing waves of carnage.

Of course, I wasn’t planning on using it on myself. What I wanted to know was how much it’d cost to Bestow it on the bee—and it was only 200! Totally doable! Since it was within the acceptable range, I went ahead and Bestowed Target on the bee.

Before I moved on to my next task, I had an idea that I could only attribute to divine inspiration: what if I could make the skill’s effect even more reliable?

I called up Editor and looked into Target’s skill description.

Target: Allows hostile enemies to target the skill holder more easily. For example, making the skill holder easier to hit in a crowd.

That was about what I expected. I tried adding: “specifically, silver wolves will

consider the skill holder their mortal enemy.” It only required 100 LP, so I did a little fist pump and completed the Edit.

“Dory, have the wolves moved from where they were earlier?”

“No, they’re right where I told you. They’re eating.”

“Then I’m off. You just wait here.”

“Please be careful.”

Dory was worried about me, so I flashed her my best smile and a thumbs up before I headed off to the wolves. They were about a thousand paces away, so less than half a mile. I had to run as fast as I could. Time was of the essence.

I came on them quickly. The pack of silver wolves was chowing down on a carcass in the middle of a trail. There were seven of them.

I was keenly aware of the fact that one screw up here would be the end of me, and I had prepared myself for the reality of the danger. At least I could deploy the Dungeon Elevator skill if things got really desperate. Still, the thought of all those teeth sinking into my flesh... I really didn’t want to imagine it.

Anxious as I was, I tossed a rock as hard as I could.

“Aroo?!”

I nailed one of them, thanks to my newly acquired Throwing skill. It yelped like a puppy, and the rest of the pack all turned to cast their baleful stares on me.

“I found an enemy for you! Follow me!” I turned on my heel and ran like my life depended on it.

“Grrrr! Woof!”

The silver wolves gave chase, barking at my back. Four-legged beasts really were a lot faster than humans. Also, I didn’t have any running-related skills, so they were bound to catch me in less than a hundred yards.

Name: Silver Wolf

Level: 158

Skills: Sharp Fangs; Reflexes (Grade C); Agility (Grade C); Leadership

This one had to be the pack's leader. They worked really well as a team—maybe because of that Leadership skill—and surrounded me in no time. I had nowhere to run. The wolves snarled and bared their fangs.

It was absolutely terrifying. I didn't stand a chance in hell of beating them, but I couldn't use my Dungeon Elevator skill yet. This was all within the scope of my predictions. I swallowed my fear and moved to provoke the lead wolf.

"I'm not scared of you! Come at me!"

"Grrr!"

The wolves flew at me from all directions.

"Gotcha!"

Flash!

An intense flash of light burst from my fingertips. It was the skill I'd acquired a while ago: Blinding Light. As the name suggested, it was super useful for totally blinding enemies.

The silver wolves crashed to the ground without laying a claw on me. I kicked one of the wolves writhing on the ground to open up a path, then started running again.

The flash seemed to be more effective than I'd expected, because I put a lot of distance between us. Surely this whole endeavor would be a failure if they lost sight of me, right? Don't worry about it. Wolves have a much stronger sense of smell than humans, so I was positive they'd come after me.

Soon, I could hear them barking. Pew! Pew! Pew! I fired off a volley of ten-inch Stone Bullets to trip them up. I was only aiming to slow them down, not hurt them. I had other plans, after all.

Finally the great tree was in sight.

Oh no!

The golden bee had already pierced the tree's trunk and was sucking its magic.

"Your evil deeds end here, you damn dirty bee," I shouted.

I started the attack by firing off a Stone Bullet. The bee evaded the projectile with ease. That High-Speed Flight skill wasn't just for show. The bee flew right at me and I parried its stinger with my blade. I didn't have time to keep crossing blades with this overgrown insect. Wolf claws came flying in from behind me.

"Ngh."

I shoved the bee back with my blade and dashed to the side to avoid the wolves. I regained my balance and saw that all the wolves had gathered on one side of the clearing.

"Grrr..."

I kept my eyes on the leader. It was locked on me at first, but was quickly drawn to the bee monster buzzing around. The leader let out a low growl. It was clearly some sort of signal, because the other wolves leapt to attack the bee. The bee countered with an aggressive stance.

Meanwhile, I took advantage of the chaos to scurry away. The monsters were now set up to fight to the death. I hid behind a tree and watched the battle.

The golden bee might have been over Level 100, but it was still stuck in a match of seven against one. It didn't stand a chance, right?

I had no idea how wrong I was.

Even with their C-Grade Agility, the wolves struggled against the bee's aerial abilities. It easily got behind them and stabbed them with its stinger. Even the wolves' C-Grade Reflexes couldn't save them.

The bee's venom was also viciously powerful. When they got hit, the wolves convulsed on the ground and foamed at the mouth before meeting a gruesome end. I would've been dead in an instant.

One after another, the silver wolves fell prey to the bee's venom, until only the leader and one other wolf remained. To think one creature could outclass all those wolves! Mutant monsters were truly terrifying. That said, the bee was

still a living being, and it looked exhausted. Its speed had dropped considerably, but it buzzed over to the subordinate wolf's tail and attempted to sting. This time, things turned out differently.

“Huh?!”

The bee didn't pull away. The stung wolf endured the pain and twined its tail around one of the bee's legs, freezing it in place. The leader wolf galloped over and bit the bee with all its might. Once it tore the bee's wings off, the wolf pinned the bee to the ground with its legs and took revenge for its fallen comrades.

The battle was over in an instant. It had looked like the wolves were going to lose, but they turned things around in the end. One of them even sacrificed its life for the other. If I were a wolf, I'd be moved to tears.

The leader licked the bodies of its fallen comrades. It didn't seem worried about the venom. At last, when the leader turned its tail to me, I reached out my hand, combined Water Drop and Lightning Strike with Magical Fusion, and fired off an electrified saltwater ball.

Perhaps it was the combination of fatigue and general relief of a battle won, but the leader was slow to react. It turned just before my spell hit.

“Uuh?!”

The leader let out a yelp, then collapsed. I dashed over and stabbed my sword through the heroic wolf that had survived so many awful battles. The leader was dead by the time I extracted my blade. *Rest well, brave wolf, you can join your comrades now.*

“Man, that sure did a number on my nerves,” I muttered. “I wish I could've defeated it without all that trickery...”

“Noir!” Dory emerged from hiding and leapt into my arms. I scooped her up princess-style and we took our victory lap. Well...that was worth it.

Chapter 17:

Finally Going Home

SOMEHOW, I made it through what had seemed like a hopeless situation—mostly because of the low LP cost on the golden bee’s skill Bestowal, and the fact that Target ended up working so well.

The amount it cost to Bestow skills varied greatly depending on the kind of skill and the nature of the target. For example, nimble enemies didn’t have much affinity with a skill like Heavy, so Bestowing something that slowed them down would require a considerable amount of LP.

At any rate, the area surrounding Dory’s tree was littered with the corpses of monsters, and the only people doing well were me and Dory.

“I guess we should probably clean this up.”

“Yes, I believe these carcasses will only attract other monsters.”

Dory didn’t seem very happy about dealing with the remains of our victory, but I had another objective: the monster materials.

7× Silver Wolf Fangs (Grade C) 7× Silver Wolf Hides (Grade B) 1× Golden Bee Wing (Grade C) 1× Golden Bee Stinger (Grade B)

The parts were all of a lower grade than I expected. I wasn’t sure if I could even sell them. If these monsters only existed in the hidden dungeon, they wouldn’t even have an established price. I’d have to ask Lola about them later.

I stowed it all away in my Pocket Dimension. As I did, Dory thanked me again. Her true body waved some of its leafy branches.

“I’d be drowning in poison if you hadn’t been here, Noir. I’m sorry I wasn’t very helpful.”

“You were *super* helpful. None of this would have been possible without your Forest Sensitivity. Once you made sure we could gather them together, the interspecies fighting and intraspecies teamwork made the rest of the plan a basic guarantee—cooperation trumps conflict every time.”

I was trying to sound cool, but the reality was that one wrong step and I'd have earned myself a one-way ticket to the afterlife.

"Are you headed down now?" Dory asked.

"I don't have much time today. I'll leave after I reach the eighth floor."

"Okay. Let me take you to the treasure first."

"Lead the way."

I followed Dory over little streams and through the brush and, after we'd walked for several minutes, we came to a small cave in the side of a hill. Apparently, the treasure was inside.

"Hm, I'm not sure if I can fit..."

The hole was pretty small, so small I didn't think I could get in there even if I crawled.

"I can get it for you," Dory said.

"Are you sure there aren't any monsters in there?"

"There aren't. It's too little anyway."

She was confident it was safe, so I took her up on the offer. She used her small body to her advantage and wiggled into the cave. She was back in under a minute.

"This is what was inside the chest," she said. "What is it?"

In her tiny hands, she held a green bead that was about an inch in diameter. It looked like a marble. I used my Discerning Eye for Items.

Wind Selection (Grade A)

Grade A?! It seemed valuable, and that got me excited. I was really curious about the name though, "Wind Selection." The bead didn't seem to have any skills, so maybe it was just a decorative item? I figured I should ask my master.

"I don't really know," I confessed. "But it seems precious. A worthy reward."

“Oh good, I’m so glad to hear that. Now let me take you to the stairs.”

The way down to the eighth floor wasn’t far from the treasure. I had to pause to wonder if I could have ever found it on my own. It was tucked away in the middle of a dense thicket of trees. Even if I’d had a bird’s eye view, the foliage would have obscured it.

As we approached the stairs, Dory started to look lonesome and more than a little sad.

“Keep at it, okay?” she said.

“I want you to live your life to the fullest too, Dory. I promise I’ll come to visit when I have time.”

“Y-you will?!”

“And we’ll have to have some real fun next time. How about I bring some delicious food from outside the dungeon?”

“I can’t wait!”

We were already fast friends after our ordeal. I shook Dory’s hand and took my leave.

“See you again soon!” I called back.

“I’ll be waiting.”

Dory watched as I descended the stairs. This staircase was well over twenty steps, but it was still shorter than my trip to the seventh floor.

“Finally...”

In stark contrast to the seventh floor, the eighth presented me with a world of silvery metallic walls. It had pretty standard corridors, if a little on the wide side. I prayed that there wouldn’t be giant creatures like there had been on the fifth floor.

Thunk thunk thunk thunk...

A heavy sound echoed from the end of the corridor. I have to admit, I got curious. Surely it was a monster or something?

“I am Noir Stardia, third son of the impoverished noble Stardia family! Who

goes there? Be you human or monster or, uh, whatever, show yourself!"

I planned to run the second anything showed up to challenge me, so I made myself an escape route with Dungeon Elevator. But as far as I could tell, nothing responded to my call. The thunking sound continued, uninterrupted. Exploring this level...would have to wait until next time. I returned to the second floor and reported back to my master.

"Thanks to your wisdom, I made it through, Master."

<That's my boy! I'd give you a big hug if I could move.> "Well that's not happening. Anyway, I found this item called a Wind Selection, any idea what it's for?"

<Ooh, now that's a pretty rare one. You can learn wind magic if you eat it.> "Huh. That sounds handy."

<But there's a catch: it only works for certain people. If you have no affinity for wind, you won't learn anything, but people who do have an affinity can learn a ton.> "Interesting..."

At Hero Academy, we'd had a lesson on items you could eat that granted you the chance to choose skills, but I'd never heard of one where the *item* made the selection for you. The world was full of mysteries, huh?

<Wanna try eating it?>

"Hrm, I thought I'd give it to a friend. I don't have much affinity to wind."

<Is your friend a giiirl?>

"Are you trying to tease me again?"

<As your master, I just want you to indulge...in everything, and earn a ton of LP. He he he.> Olivia cackled.

Okay, enough of that. I thanked her for her help and started to head out, but before I got far, my master stopped me to check on my LP situation. I told her I was at about 500.

<So, Noir, you've collected a lot of materials by now, right? I think it might be a good idea to pick up LP Conversion—Items, even if it's expensive.> "Ooh, that sounds useful."

<Just think of it as the item version of LP Conversion—Money. When you have the LP to spare, you should grab it.> “Understood. I’ll be out for a few days, but I’ll be back.”

<You better not take too long or poor old Olivia will turn to stone.> I said my goodbyes and, at last, I left the dungeon. By the time I got out, the sun was already rising. I really had spent the entire night in there. I hurried home, where I found Alice pacing restlessly outside the house.

“Brother dearest!”

“Sorry, don’t tell me you were waiting for me?”

“Of course I was. You never came home...”

“You have dark circles under your eyes. Were you up all night?”

“I was truly worried...for a number of reasons.”

I didn’t really understand she meant.

“Wh-whose house did you spend the night at?” she asked anxiously.

“I didn’t stay at anyone’s house. I spent the night in a dungeon.”

“Oh, is that all? Hm. I suppose I worried for nothing then.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

Before I could ask, Tigerson and my parents came rushing forward.

<You are home, Noir! I was worried for you.> “I wasn’t worried in the slightest, sweetie. I knew you’d come home safe.”

“It’s all your fault our family meeting yesterday was a complete mess. You really need to grow u—mmph! What are you two doing?”

Alice and my mother covered my father’s mouth with their hands.

“Breakfast is ready. Are you hungry?” my mother asked.

“Ravenous.”

“It’s a holiday, after all, so you should eat your fill and get some rest,” my sister added.

“Sorry to disappoint, Alice, but I can’t take a break today. Once I eat, I’m off

on an expedition to complete a guild request.”

“Oh. Please...take care of yourself.”

“I will. Though I’m gonna need your help, Tigerson.”

<You may count on me, my friend.>

Things might get a little crazy sometimes, but I really did feel at ease at home. I went inside and savored my warm breakfast. It made me forget my exhaustion from not having slept. Delicious!

Chapter 18:

Luna's Savings

IT WAS THE FIRST DAY of a four-day weekend, but there was no time to rest. I guess it was better than being unemployed.

Tigerson and I left the house as soon as breakfast was finished to meet up with the rest of our party.

<So, Noir, where shall I take you?>

"A place called Amon Village. We'll leave through the south gate and then head southwest. It's about a three-day round trip by carriage."

<Hm. I believe I could make the trip in a single day.> "You're amazing. But don't push yourself too hard. I could use the sleep."

I was in the middle of a growth spurt, so if we could manage it, I really wanted to use Tigerson's back as a bed to get at least two or three hours of shut-eye.

The other members of our party were already waiting at the gate. Emma, Luna, and—wait a minute, Lola?! I slid off Tigerson's back and the three of them raced over.

"Hi, Noir! And you, too, Tigerson."

"Good morning, Mr. Noir," said Lola. "Keep up the good work today."

"You came all the way out here to see me off, huh?" I asked her.

"Of course I did! If it were up to me...I'd abandon all my responsibilities and go with you."

Lola's smile was full of extra meaning, and Emma gave her the dirtiest look. It was a holiday, but it turned out the guild wasn't closed. It was actually kind of a busy time for them, and Lola had her own competition to deal with.

"I'll complete the request to help you out," I promised her.

"Do your best! But don't forget the most important thing..." Lola left a dramatic pause.

.....

An excessively long one! Just as we were about to tumble over with anticipation, she finally finished: “Is your health, Mr. Noir.”

“What a ridiculous waste of time...” Emma muttered.

“Truly. You overreached there, Lola, I’m a bit embarrassed for you,” said Luna.

“Well, keep up the good fight, Mr. Noir!”

Lola completely ignored the other two and struck a cute, triumphant pose. Her mental fortitude was nothing short of impressive. There was this stereotype that receptionists were meek, but from what I’d seen, they had to be pretty tough to deal with adventurers, many of whom could get kind of aggressive.

“That reminds me, Mr. Noir, do you have a moment?”

Lola seemed to have something personal to talk about, so I lent her an ear. When I did, she whispered that she’d give me an extra *special* coupon if I completed the request.

Special, huh? I had to wonder what she meant by that. And, you know...it was exciting just to think about.

“W-well then, why don’t we get on and get going,” I said.

“I’m praying for your safe return! You can do it!”

Lola saw us off as we set out for Amon Village. It quickly became apparent that Tigerson was much faster than any carriage. We easily outstripped the other traffic, giving both the drivers and passengers a start. That said, we weren’t really going *that* fast. The breeze felt just right. I suspected Tigerson was trying to be considerate, and I appreciated it.

“Hey, what’d Lola whisper earlier?” Emma asked, pouting.

“Um, nothing important.”

“If it’s not important, then you can tell me.”

“She just said she’d give me another coupon if I completed this request.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what threw you for a loop.”

“What? It did not!”

“It totally did! I bet she’s going to give you a sexual one, too. Ugh, you’re such a perv, Noir!”

I tried to explain, but Emma wasn’t hearing any of it. *Did I do something wrong?*

Thankfully, Luna chimed in. “It’s only natural for a boy his age to have such interests. If there’s anything I can help you with, Sir Noir, don’t hesitate to ask. We’re friends, after all.”

I was touched by her thoughtfulness. Admittedly, I did get the sense that Luna’s words could have been interpreted to mean something a little dirty, but maybe my head was just in the gutter.

“That reminds me, I have something for you, Emma.” I pulled out the treasure I’d found, hoping it’d cheer her up.

“Huh? What’s this?”

“If you eat it, you can learn wind magic. But it only works if you already have an affinity. I don’t, so you should have it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Be my guest.”

“This is what I love about you!” Emma flung her arms around me and gave me a tight squeeze. She did want to get stronger, after all. “But...I would feel kinda bad just taking it from you.”

“Don’t. I owe you for always helping me earn LP.”

Of all the people who’d helped me, I’d earned the most LP from Emma, and I’d never given her any compensation. I’d even earned some LP from that hug she gave me just then.

Emma looked excited as she swallowed the Wind Selection. She clenched and released her fists and looked a little puzzled. “Wow! I feel energy surging within me!”

Let’s see what happened...ooh!

When I checked Emma with my Discerning Eye, I saw a bunch of changes.

She'd only had two skills before: B-Grade Dual Wielded Dagger and Wind Strike, but now she had four. Her new skills were Run Like the Wind and Wind Slash. Emma was overjoyed when I told her and her bosom bounced as she punched the air.

<I apologize for interrupting your fun, but there are monsters up ahead. Would you like me to avoid them?> Just up ahead of us were a pair of centaurs—monsters that were half-horse and half-person. They might have looked human up top, but their skin had a bluish tinge and the “whites” of their eyes were black. They were truly eerie to behold.

One was Level 20 and the other Level 30. Both of them had the skill Hind Leg Power Kick, and the Level 30 one had learned Fireball.

“Hey, mind if I take them?” Emma asked.

“We’ll join you then,” I said.

“Naw, sorry, I wanna try on my own to test out my skills.”

“Hm, okay, well, Luna and I will help if you look like you’re in trouble.”

“Sounds good, please do.”

Emma hopped off Tigerson and really stuck the landing. The centaurs took an offensive stance as she approached. I readied a Stone Bullet and Luna took out her gun. I was pretty sure Emma would be fine, but just in case...

The new skills Emma had learned were in one of our textbooks, but they also seemed pretty intuitive to use. First, she tried out Run Like The Wind, a spell that used the wind to lighten the user’s body.

When the Level 20 centaur rushed Emma, she drew her daggers and sprinted at it. Just before they crashed together, the centaur reared up on its hind legs and tried to smash her into the ground, but Emma dodged the attack in a gust of wind and got around behind it.

No, you idiot, that was a trick! I thought as the centaur kicked with its muscular hind legs. That skill it had must’ve helped, too. It kicked so hard it made a howl of wind, but it didn’t land.

Emma had actually anticipated the attack. She leapt onto the creature,

jabbing her knife into its neck in mid-air.

“Lady Emma,” Luna shouted. “Get away from there!”

“Wha?!”

A blazing fireball hurtled at Emma’s back with immense speed. The Level 30 centaur had fired it. Emma rolled off the centaur’s back and caught herself. The fireball landed a direct hit on the other centaur’s head. Its hair went up in flames, but the creature didn’t so much as twitch. It was already dead.

“Dare try that again?” Luna shouted at the centaur. “Well, how about this?”

“Wait, Luna, I think Emma’s got a plan.”

I stopped Luna from firing off her weapon. Emma cast Wind Slash at about the same time as the remaining centaur launched another fireball. The range of her spell was impressive, as was its size—it had to be at least six feet long. Her wind magic sliced the fireball clean in two and was still going strong as it careened toward the monster.

“Guh?!”

Those were the centaur’s last words. Its human and horse sections separated neatly. Emma jogged over to check if it was still alive, but I was confident she’d already won.

<Quite impressive for such a young girl.>

“She’s got a real talent for wind magic.”

“She must have, to be able to use skills she just learned so effectively.”

“Luna, if there’s ever any skill you want, make sure you tell me. I can Bestow it on you.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m not in the same position as Emma.”

“Position?”

Luna looked contemplative. “You have shared your life with her. As someone you’ve only just met, I feel odd receiving the same consideration.”

I didn’t think that was something she really needed to worry about. Luna paused, and brought a finger to her chin.

“No...I know what I need, Sir Noir. Would you make me a savings account?”

I was perplexed, and when I told her so, Luna was all too happy to explain. Apparently, she wanted to save some of the LP she helped me generate.

“You can use twenty or thirty percent of what you earn from me to save up for granting me a skill I might one day need. You can use the rest however you see fit.”

“I feel like that proportion’s a little unfair.”

“All right, then we can discuss that a little more in the future... I know this is a little sudden, but why don’t we make some more right now?”

“Umm...?”

Just as I was wondering how she planned to do that, she snuggled up against my back, snaked her arms around me, and moved them up from my waist to my chest. Then she rested her cheek against my shoulder. “Hm, not bad. Do you agree, Sir Noir?”

“I-I agree, yes,” I said. Of course, getting a hug from a total knockout wouldn’t be bad!

“I-I know this is all for the LP, b-but it’s still a little awkward, huh.”

“Y-you can say that again,” I agreed.

“But we should sit like this for a bit...for the LP of course.”

“Of course.”

I’d actually already gotten the LP, but did I need to tell her that? While I hesitated, I heard an extremely angry voice from below.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing while I’m off fighting monsters?!”

We were watching your back, I swear! But even if I explained, it wouldn’t quell Emma’s anger.

“I hate you two! You traitors!”

<Do not be so angry, young lady. Did you not do much the same yourself earlier?> “My name isn’t ‘young lady’! It’s Emma! You coulda stopped them too!”

<Then I would be obligated to stop you from taking similar actions.> “You can ignore it when I do it!”

<I do not understand.>

“Just conveniently pretend you don’t see or hear it when I do it!”

<I see, but I do not particularly understand.>

Tigerson gave up trying. I didn’t particularly understand it either, but the one thing I did know was that this trip wasn’t going to be boring.

Chapter 19:

Amon Village!

IT HAD BEEN about a day since we left town. We had found the landmarks we'd been told about, so we knew we were near the village. I told Tigerson I was getting thirsty, so we decided to rest near a stream.

<Noir, would you do the honors?>

"Sure thing." I filled my canteen with fresh water and poured it over the flower on Tigerson's head.

<Oooh ahhh, that's the stuff...!>

Tigerson got a little silly like usual. I was used to it, but Emma and Luna looked aghast.

"Oh, don't be so weirded out. He needs it to live."

"D-do you always do that? Where is that effeminate voice coming from?!"

"He has two sets of vocal cords, apparently."

"Sir Tigerson is unusual in many regards, I see."

<My tulip indicates my physical and mental state,> Tigerson explained when he snapped out of his trance.

"So it has to do with your mood too?" Emma asked.

<Indeed. My flower loses its vigor when I am sad, and if it were to ever be severed, I would be weakened severely. Although, it will eventually grow back.>

Basically, the flower was both the source of his power and his biggest weak spot. But more importantly, I was hungry. Emma seemed to be too.

"Wanna roast some fish?" I asked, gazing into the water.

"Good idea. I guess we should hurry up and catch some."

"Yeah, let's give it a shot."

We set to searching for fish in the stream. It was so clear, we found some

right away. I took one down in the shallows by throwing a knife.

“Ha! You have a Throwing skill, don’t you?” said Luna.

“It’s actually pretty useful. I can instantly throw a knife from my Pocket Dimension too.”

“Well, I’m not about to let you beat me.”

Luna fired off several shots from her magical firearm and the exact same number of fish floated up to the surface. The Energy Shots she used this time were pretty small.

“I can control the size,” she explained when I commented on it. “I think the smallest I can do is about an inch in diameter, but the better I get at Magical Firearms, the more control I’ll have.”

“You’re pretty great at it already, Luna!”

Both Emma and I applauded. Her shooting skills were nothing to sniff at. She had sharp eyes and good aim, *and* she could use Healing Shot. She might knock herself out when she overdid it, but relatively speaking that was nothing compared to the rest of her skills.

“Well, I got the fish, now we need to cook them.”

<I see, Emma just picked them up after everyone else did the work. What an easy job you have.> “I don’t wanna hear it from you!”

<Indeed.>

“Fine, then Tigerson will help me cook. We’re going to go find something to burn.”

<Excuse me, I am Noir’s familiar.>

“Don’t get hung up on particulars!”

Emma hopped on Tigerson’s back to go search for kindling while Luna and I took a break. Somehow, Emma and Tigerson already seemed to be getting along. She always had a knack for taming stray dogs, and she was good at talking to nonhumans too. I had to admit, I was a little jealous.

When Emma and Tigerson returned, we prepared and ate our fish together,

then continued on our journey to the village. Tigerson only had to run for about ten minutes before we arrived at our destination.

There was a board near the entrance with the words “Amon Village” written on it, so we could be sure we had the right place. It was an agricultural village, and it covered a lot of land. A fence surrounded the perimeter to keep monsters out. Something like a moat ran along the inside of the fence too, only it had no water. It was probably designed to act more like a pit trap—any monsters or animals that got through the fence would fall right in.

“Wow, it looks like they have all sorts of ingenious protective measures.”

“Yeah. There’s no big town nearby, so they have to look out for themselves.”

It had to be hard, living so far out in the countryside. They no doubt had different troubles out here than the kind we were used to.

We startled some men when we entered the village on Tigerson’s back. The only reason they didn’t call for help was because they saw the three of us riding on top of him.

“He’s our familiar,” I assured them. “He doesn’t attack people.”

<You may rest easy.>

“It can talk?!”

<You find speech that surprising? I shudder to think how you would react to watching me eat.> I don’t think they would find that part particularly surprising!

All that aside, I turned to the thirty-something man we’d just met. “We’re adventurers. Your village put up a request, right?”

“Huh? What request?”

“Oh, it must be about the thieves,” his companion said.

“Ah, maybe you’re right.”

I was confused by their response. How did they not know what I was talking about? Lola said the head of the village had made the request. The villagers’ expressions abruptly changed when I brought up that detail.

“Don’t tell me that’s what he was up to in town two weeks ago,” one of them

groaned.

“He said he was getting medicine for a backache. I didn’t think he would actually put in a request...”

It sounded like he had done it without consulting the villagers. I asked them why he might do that.

“I’m sure that if it was too public, someone would leak it to the thieves.”

“Yeah, plus there was that incident with his grandkid, too.”

“Anyway, to think his request would attract adventurers commanding such a powerful monster!”

The villagers were unusually excited, not that I could blame them—who wouldn’t be reassured having Tigerson as an ally? They were so excited they ran ahead of us all the way to the back of the village.

“Chieeeeeef! Chieeeeeef!”

“The adventurers are here! The adventurers are here!”

They rushed into a wooden house. Not a minute later, an old man tumbled out of the building. He dashed out as fast as he could while pulling up his pants. I’d never seen anything quite that undignified before.

“A-a-a-are you the adventurer who accepted my request?!”

<Do I look like an adventurer to you? I am their familiar.> “My most humble apologies! My excitement has clouded my judgement.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Noir, and these are my comrades, Emma and Luna. And this is Tigerson.”

“Goodness. I’m the village chief, M.T. Head. Despite my name, I’m of perfectly sound mind—oh, drat, d-does anyone have a belt?” The chief was frantically trying to keep his pants up. I guess they’d gotten loose when he tumbled out of the house. “Hurry! Or these wonderful adventurers will be defiled with the sight of my dirty underwear!”

“Here, use this.”

“Thank you! You will be the next chief!”

“Hooray!”

Wh-what the...?

What...interesting people. Maybe the village was worse off than I thought.

“Would your honorable party deign to save us? Our village has been beset by thieves for a long time. We’ve endured until now, but...a few days ago, they abducted my dearest granddaughter. I’ve had quite enough.”

So the village chief risked the long, dangerous journey to town for his sweet granddaughter, and without saying a word to anyone. Chief M.T. Head seemed like a pretty good guy after all.

“We intend to help you to the best of our abilities, but we’d appreciate the cooperation of everyone in the village,” I said.

“Everyone! Lend your ears to the kind words of the great Noir! I know I haven’t been much use as village chief.”

As the chief was brought to tears, overcome with emotion, he was surrounded by smiling villagers. They all seemed to trust him. Frankly, it tickled me to see such a heartwarming spectacle.

“How nice...”

“Yeah.”

Emma and I shared a chuckle. Once things settled down, we dug into the details. As far as the thieves were concerned, the villagers weren’t allowed to leave the village, and the thieves kept an eye out to make sure they didn’t. The chief had to put on quite the act in order to leave the village—he’d even been foaming at the mouth. He also came up with this story about meeting an old friend to get some medicine.

Even with all that, the thieves had threatened that, if he did anything out of the ordinary, they’d kill his granddaughter, but he was undeterred.

“Hm.” Luna abruptly pointed her gun at one of the houses.

“What’s wrong?”

“I sense something strange from that direction.”

“Huh, you’re right, there’s someone there.”

A man was peering out from behind the building.

“Wait! He’s one of ours. Good Guy, what are you doing? Come here.”

The man headed over with a sullen look on his face. The chief seemed fond of him, though, and introduced him with a big smile.

“Good Guy started living with us about six months ago. He may have a strange name, but he’s a hero who drives away boars and bears. And I have a lot of sympathy for him on the weird name front.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Good Guy...” He seemed unusually unenergetic compared to the other villagers, but it sounded like the others relied on him.

“What’s wrong, Good Guy? You look unwell.”

“Oh, I just did a little too much belly-dancing yesterday, so I guess I’m just tired out. Ha ha ha.”

“Cheer up, Good Guy, we’ll give you some of our vegetables later.”

“Ah, thanks.”

He seemed fine with the other villagers, but wary of us. Maybe he was just shy. That wasn’t that weird. You can’t expect people to instantly trust strangers they’ve just met.

“He sure is popular for someone who just moved here six months ago, huh?”

“Maybe it’s because he has such a different vibe.”

“And maybe his name actually suits him, unlike the chief. At least, that’s what I’d like to think.”

“Yeah, I get that feeling too.”

“Sir Noir,” said Luna. “He seems like he might be useful, what do you think? I’d also like to know a little something about the villagers’ abilities.”

“Oh yeah, lemme look into that.” On Luna’s advice, I used my Discerning Eye on Good Guy.

Name: Good Guy

Age: 33

Species: Human

Level: 34

Occupation: Thief

Skills: One-Handed Blades (Grade C); Stone Bullet

So he wasn't such a good guy after all?!

Chapter 20:

Just Be Honest

I'VE HEARD PEOPLE SAY that “names and natures often agree” before, but it didn't really seem to be the case here. Good Guy's occupation was “thief.” Was he one of the group of the thieves tormenting the village?

I wasn't really sure what to do, so I quietly consulted with Emma and Luna.

“What the?! We need to tell everyone.”

“Shh, Lady Emma, we need to play it cool.”

“O-okay. So, Noir, what do we do?”

“Let's approach nonchalantly and grab him.”

Emma and Luna nodded at my proposal. I was over Level 60 already, so Good Guy didn't pose much of a threat. He didn't have many skills at his disposal to get the upper hand either, but still, we needed to approach with caution. It'd be extremely annoying if he took a hostage.

“Chief, I do have one question for you.” I pretended we had something to talk to the chief about to get closer to Good Guy. I made an effort to keep my eyes on the chief, but Good Guy was pretty sharp. He was already trying to get away from us.

Had he figured us out? His eyes were guarded and his right hand was on the hilt of his sword. Not good. I was going to have to make my move. When Good Guy was away from the villagers, I pulled a knife from my Pocket Dimension and threw it.

“Guh! You noticed?!”

I aimed the knife at his feet, but Good Guy jumped out of the way. He was used to combat. You could tell from how he drew his sword with his right hand while firing off a Stone Bullet with his left.

“Take that!”

I wasn't copying him, but I wasn't going to take that nonsense lying down

either, so I fired off a Stone Bullet of my own. I had the undisputed upper hand when it came to that duel. My shot easily knocked his off course and kept going in its trajectory toward him. Though of course it did, as my bullet was three times the size of his.

“What is that?! I’m not going down that easily!”

Good Guy readied his sword and raised it over head, slamming it into the stone racing toward his chest. He timed his strike just right and knocked the stone to the ground. I had to admit, my enemy was impressive.

Good Guy seemed surprised he’d pulled the maneuver off, but the surprise was quickly replaced with a smirk. Then it transformed into abject despair as—ka-pow!—Luna’s shot knocked Good Guy’s sword from his hand.

“You should never get too cocky.”

“Dammit all to hell...”

Good Guy tried to run, but he didn’t get one step before he tripped and fell flat on his face, thanks to Emma rushing in to trip him. Luna and I lunged forward to pin him down, and thus ended the battle.

It was at this point that the villagers started to freak out.

“Wh-what on earth is the meaning of this, Noir?!”

“Just calm down and hear me out, guys. I have an ability called Discerning Eye, and according to that, your Good Guy here is actually a thief.”

The crowd erupted into concerned chatter. I couldn’t blame them. I mean, someone they trusted had turned out to be a spy. Good Guy had seemingly given up, so he didn’t resist at all. In stark contrast, the village chief couldn’t believe it.

“Tell me it’s a lie, Good Guy. Were you deceiving us this whole time?”

“Ugh, they’re right, I was. I was sent to keep an eye on you. I’m one of them...”

It was a clever idea. The thieves were already checking on the village daily, so the villagers didn’t even consider there could be a second layer of surveillance. Good Guy conveyed information that his fellow thieves couldn’t get from the

outside.

“Everything was an act to get you to like me.”

“Then why, Good Guy, why is your head hung in shame?!” the chief shouted, gripping Good Guy’s trembling shoulders. “You may be working as a thief, but...I know it is not who you are! Because if it were, you would have known of my act with the back medicine! Yet you didn’t report that to the other thieves!”

“I—I...”

Hey, that was right. If the chief got permission to leave the village, it must’ve been because Good Guy didn’t report any of his suspicions. So maybe the chief did have a point. Could Good Guy actually be supporting the villagers?

“We believe in you, Good Guy.”

“Yeah, you always did so much for us.”

Good Guy shut his eyes and shook his head. “No! No! No! No! No! I’m an evil person. I don’t care about you at all!”

“Good Guy, we know you aren’t a bad guy. I can’t believe all the days we spent together were a lie.”

“Like I said, I—”

“I’ve heard enough,” I said. “Let me handle the rest.”

I wanted to get the truth out of Good Guy. I also wanted to get intel on the enemy. I was going to Get Creative.

Speak From the Heart — 100 LP

Prevents the skill holder from lying, forcing them to voice their true feelings.

The only question was how much it would cost to Bestow it on him.

Good Guy + 200 LP

That was a lot less than I thought it would cost. Interestingly, it would have cost 300 LP for a number of the other villagers, and for some, the cost was well over four digits. Good Guy was probably never a very good liar to begin with.

I had close to 900 LP, thanks to Luna and Emma's help, so I spent the 300 to Bestow the skill on him. That done, I came at him again: "Now, Good Guy, I've Bestowed a skill on you that prevents you from lying, so why don't you tell everyone how you really feel?"

"Look, I already told you, I—I was always all alone... I had no family to speak of... About a year ago, I was wandering around and the head of the thieves asked me to join them. I became one of them so I could eat, but...I wasn't suited to being a thief. So about six months ago, when they started talking about having someone keep watch on the town, I volunteered."

Once someone joined a band of thieves, it wasn't easy to extricate themselves. So, out of desperation, Good Guy became a spy.

"And once I started living here, people depended on me for the first time in my life. And it made me...happy! So happy! I had spent so much of my life alone, but everyone here was so kind to me. They called me a friend! Before I knew it I...I started to love this town and everyone in it!"

"Good Guy, Good Guy! We all feel the same way!"

The village chief hugged him and other villagers joined in. They were all absolutely dripping with tears and snot. People can be quick to cover up how they really feel with words, but sometimes, you just need to be honest.

I'd ask Good Guy about the location of thieves' hideout later.

"Tigerson, are you crying?"

<Raarr... Good Guy... I understand. I understand too well how you feel.> "So it got to you too, huh?"

Tigerson had been alone for several hundred years. It wasn't surprising that he felt pangs of sympathy for Good Guy's plight.

Somewhat more surprisingly, Luna was also down on all fours, sobbing uncontrollably. "I could feel his emotions pouring into me. I'm so glad he found

friends he could actually trust...”

“You were adventuring on your own for a while too, weren’t you, Luna?”

Both Luna and Tigerson had something in common with Good Guy. Emma, on the other hand, seemed unaffected.

“You’ve always been popular, haven’t you, Emma?” I asked.

“Oh, come on. That’s not true.”

“At school, not a day went by that you weren’t swarmed by boys.”

“That was just because of my chest.”

“I don’t think that’s the case. I think it’s your innocent, cheery, and honest personality.”

“You’re no different, Noir!”

“I dunno, I have a pretty gloomy disposition, and I’m a coward. I’ve spent plenty of time alone, too...”

Changing classes at my old school had always caused me a lot of pain. I had no friends to begin with, so I could never feel comfortable in the classroom, and I struggled to figure out how to talk to the other students. While I was floundering, they made other friends and it got even harder. I’d gotten a lot more sociable since then, admittedly.

“I have some darkness in my heart too, you know,” Emma said.

“Sure you do.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?!” Emma puffed out her cheeks and immediately began to regale me with “dark” episodes from her past. They were all pretty light nonproblems, but I pretended to agree with her.

Once everything calmed down, Good Guy approached us, looking refreshed. “I haven’t felt so free in ages. Did you really give me a skill that stops me from lying?”

“Yup, I did. And I’ll erase it if you tell me what I want to know.”

“No! I don’t want to get rid of it. I want to live the rest of my life like this.”

I suppose the most important thing is to live true to yourself. Although, if you were as faithful to your own needs and desires as my master, you'd probably run into more than a little trouble. In any case, I listened closely to what the painfully honest Good Guy had to say.

Chapter 21:

Magic Eater

GOOD GUY gave us all the information he had on the thieves. According to him, there were about twenty in total, and they lived in a hideout on top of the mountain. They were all quite skilled, but only a few were stronger than Good Guy and, even then, not by much. Given all that, I thought we might be able to pull off a surprise attack.

“The leader’s the only really special one. He might even be stronger than you. So you’re going to have to watch out.”

“What kind of abilities does he have?”

“He uses a spear, and he has all sorts of other strange techniques. Anyone who goes up against him ends up weakened.”

“Weakened?”

“I asked him how he does it, but he wouldn’t tell me. He’s wary, so he hides his abilities from others.”

Good Guy was a subordinate, so maybe he hadn’t been trusted. People who are always on guard like this thief leader seemed to be are kind of a pain to deal with.

<What do you intend to do, Noir?> asked Tigerson.

“We should attack tonight.”

There was a good chance that we could catch them off guard after dark. I had a Night Vision skill, so I had the advantage then. Tigerson already had pretty sharp eyes, but Bestowing Night Vision on Emma and Luna seemed like the next move. When I explained the plan, Good Guy was impressed.

“You’re truly something special, Noir. I’ve never met someone with such powers.”

“I’m just lucky, that’s all.”

“On a related note, their regular patrol should be coming by soon.”

“Let’s grab them, then. If we take them out, we’ll have fewer enemies to worry about later.”

Being outsiders, we were too easy to identify, so we waited inside the chief’s house until the thief patrol came. There, we enjoyed some vegetables and drinks before going back outside. We more or less immediately spotted Good Guy talking to a pair of suspicious-looking people near the entrance.

“Hey, Good Guy, what’s with the new kids?” one of them asked.

“Oh, them? They’re adventurers.”

“Adventurers? Why the hell didn’t you chase them off? You tryin’ to get our asses handed to us?”

Obviously, that was what Good Guy should have done. One of them tried to grab Good Guy, but he knocked them away.

“Gah...”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” the other thief shouted.

I took him out with a kick. We quickly tied the defeated thieves up while they vented their anger at Good Guy.

“You damn traitor!”

“Sorry, but I’m not a thief anymore.”

“The leader’s gonna kill you.”

“Speaking of him, could you tell me about his abilities?” I asked, forcing my way into the conversation.

But the thieves just spit on the ground in front of me.

“Luna, if you don’t mind.”

“You got it.”

“Eeek!”

Luna pressed the muzzle of her magical firearm against the thief’s head, and they both melted into compliance.

“I-I-I dunno anything about his abilities, seriously. But his spear is really sharp.

I've seen him stab right through an enemy's shield."

Hm. His weapon probably had skills, then. I would have to be cautious of it.

We left the two tied-up thieves in one of the village's sheds. When we were finished, Emma looked concerned. "Hey, Noir, I'm happy you want to give me a Night Vision skill, but are you going to have enough LP? I don't want you overdoing it."

"Ugh, you're right, I don't have quite enough. Making the skill even once costs 200, but Bestowing it would be 450 for you, and then another 400 for Luna."

I was just shy of 600 LP, so I needed to earn way more for this to work. When the chief and other villagers heard of my predicament, they all volunteered to help.

"If there's anything we can do, just ask," said the chief.

"Anything, huh...?"

My first thought was delicious food, but that was probably hoping for too much. The thieves had robbed the village of most of its valuables, but given the village didn't have much to begin with, that meant they mostly stole agricultural products. In other words, the thieves were keeping the village under their thumb to fill their own bellies. That meant I'd have to go for the *other* method.

"Um, so, this is kind of embarrassing, but I, uh, get stronger when attractive women are nice to me..."

"Goodness! Luckily, we still have some young women in the village. We obeyed the thieves partially on the condition that they wouldn't kidnap any more of them."

The chief quickly assembled all the remaining women in the village. I broke out into a cold sweat when I realized that many of them were married.

"What age range are you looking for?"

"Umm, from sixteen...no, fourteen..." I had received LP from Alice and she was only fifteen. Although, it worked with Dory too... "Fourteen...no, eight."

"Uhhh...isn't that a little disturbingly low?!" said Emma. "You're joking, I hope, Noir."

“I’m not some kind of creep! The LP thing is just...weird...so it seems to work with literally anyone of the opposite sex...”

“Really? You have no interest in eight-year-olds?” Emma teased.

“Of course not!”

“I’ve assembled women from age seven to thirty—these are the sexiest women in Amon Village.”

I wished he hadn’t said that so cheerfully.

“I imagine, given your age, that a woman over thirty might be beyond your interest, but this woman has the best body in the village. She is married, however.”

“Knock it off, chief! That chest belongs to me alone!” shouted the man who was probably her husband.

“Just share it for a bit! The fate of the village depends on it!” said the chief.

“How can you ask me to do that? She’s my wife!”

“You can be the chief in the future.”

“Really? That’s a promise!”

“I won’t make this offer again.”

Just how many kids does this chief have...

The chief cleared his throat and continued. “They may not compare with your lovely Lady Emma, but our women are unquestionably excellent. Do you think they could earn you some LP?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Then, Amon Village Honeys, share your affections with the great Noir.”

“Yay! Excuse us, Master Noir!”

“Whaa?!”

The women were way more into the whole idea than I’d expected.

In the end, I earned quite a bit. I pretended I couldn't see the sour looks on my friends' faces and gave both Emma and Luna Night Vision. After that, I still had 800 LP left over.

"It's about an hour's walk to the hideout, so we should probably get some shut-eye before we head out," I said somewhat awkwardly.

We had dinner at the chief's house, then lay down for a little nap. But before I could sleep, I shot up out of bed. There was an uproar in the village.

"Chief! Come quick! It's a magic eater!"

"What rotten timing. You all should hide. This monster comes to the village every so often."

"Ah, that's the monster Lola warned us about."

She'd said it was a powerful enemy that appeared near the village. As I remembered that, I found the villagers were all murmuring with the chief and looking over at us.

"Wait...surely, Noir and the others could defeat it."

"Don't be ridiculous. That thing is no normal monster."

"But—"

<We will not know until we try, will we?> Tigerson cut in. <I think it would be best to run if things seem too dangerous, however.> "Yeah, I hear you. Let's go." I at least wanted to figure out how strong it was.

While we set out, we had the villagers do what they usually did.

"We're going to retreat to our shelter," they said. "Promise us you won't do anything unreasonable."

"We won't, promise."

We'd heard the magic eater showed up about once a month. When we left the chief's residence, we saw what had to be the monster slowly wandering into the village.

From a distance, it looked like a person, but when I got closer, I could tell it was no such thing. It had a bald head, gray skin, and no eyes or mouth. The lack-of-mouth thing definitely freaked me out a little. What it did have was a massive, round, fanged hole in its stomach. It also stood at about six feet tall, and its movements were sluggish. Emma and Luna looked thoroughly disgusted.

“What is that thing? It’s horrifying...”

“At least it seems to be slow...”

<Move, I shall approach first.>

Tigerson sprinted toward the creature without hesitation. But the magic eater didn’t seem remotely startled. It just continued its lethargic march. Tigerson used one of his powerful forelegs to swipe the creature, and the magic eater’s body lifted off the ground.

<Hngh, it is harder than it looks.>

Despite Tigerson’s violent attack, the eater stood back up like nothing had happened.

<What is the meaning of this?>

“Hang on.”

Name: Magic Eater

Level: 80

Skills: Eat Creature; Eat Magic; Physical Resistance (Grade A); Slow

Hm, so it was exceptionally strong against physical attacks. It did have the one negative status effect skill, but overall it was at a much higher level than the other monsters in the area.

“It’s strong against physical attacks. And it can eat magic.”

“Yeeuck, do you think it eats with that mouth on its stomach?”

“Probably! I’ll aim at its face, Emma, you go for the arms. Luna, you take the legs, please.”

“Got it.”

“Leave it to me.”

We made a point of avoiding its greedy stomach and aimed to attack multiple other points all at once. We matched our timing and fired off our spells.

Chapter 22:

Time to Head Out!

THE THREE OF US aimed our spells and firearms at various parts of the creature and fired at the same time. We prayed it wouldn't have time to use its skills. Later, I wanted to punch myself for even thinking that.

"Uh."

"Ewwww..."

Just before our attacks hit, mouths appeared all over its body and gobbled up our spells.

"Ehhh heh...heh...heh..." It let out an unsettling laugh. Its frothing mouths were, in a word, terrifying.

<Mmph.>

"Tigerson, is something bothering you?"

<It is faint, but I feel as though its evil has increased. It is just my intuition...>

"You mean it got stronger? Hang on...wh-whoa?! It went up a level?!"

It had been Level 80 earlier, but now it was Level 81.

Luna frowned. "I suppose it gets stronger whenever it absorbs magic."

"That seems plausible..."

"What do we do, Noir? Keep fighting?" The anxious look on Emma's face was completely understandable; we hadn't yet found a single attack that worked. She was probably also worried about overexerting ourselves or getting injured before we made our move on the thieves' hideout.

"Let's fall back for now—or maybe we should just give it the slip."

<In either case, you must get on my back.> We did as Tigerson said and fled the village. The magic eater pursued us, but we were too fast for it to keep up. A few miles outside the town, we encountered a few small monsters, which we hunted down. We left their carcasses on the road for the eater, and when it

caught up to us, watched the gluttonous creature gobble up their corpses, crunching on their bones. We prepared a few more meals for it as we went, then slipped around it back into town while it was busy gorging itself.

“What *is* that thing? It’s so unsettling.”

“Seriously. I’m sure there’s some way to defeat it, but this is some seriously bad timing. It could come back at any time, too. I don’t know what else to do.”

It wasn’t like we could wait, either. The thieves might notice that their comrades hadn’t returned and send reinforcements. If they put their guard up, we wouldn’t get the jump on them. I really, really wanted to avoid that. While I floundered, Tigerson offered a suggestion.

<What if I stand guard in the village? Then if the eater returns, I can repeat our earlier course of action with the bait. Or perhaps I might overexert myself and thereby defeat it.> “Hey, by ‘overexerting’ yourself, do you mean that you might come to harm?”

<Perhaps.>

“Well, listen, I don’t want you to shave years off your life over this.”

<I see. Then I shall stick to our previous course of action.> “Good. Then in the meantime, we’ll go take out the thieves.”

I prayed that the magic eater wouldn’t come back before we did. Once we gave an update to the villagers, the three of us set out for the hideout.

It was already dark when we arrived at the foot of the mountain. We only had the moon to light our way. Normally I’d want a lantern, but we all had Night Vision, so we made it up the slope to the hideout without much trouble. There weren’t many monsters, just a lot of stones, so the footing was rather poor. We took care on the steeper inclines as we pressed on.

“There it is. That must be the hideout.”

On a flat spot near the summit stood an old castle surrounded by trees and shrubs. Its age was palpable, but it was still a fairly large and impressive two-story building.

Some paranoid noble family must've lived there once. The torches were lit at the entrance, which was guarded by two men wielding spears. They looked like they were drinking. They probably weren't giving the job their full attention, since the chances of attack were slim. A good sign for us.

We hid behind some trees and discussed our strategy.

"Hey, Noir, should we take out the guards first?"

"It's probably about midnight. Let's wait a little longer just to be sure."

"Okay. Those guards look pretty drunk, though. I think they'd go down easy."

That's what I was banking on, too. Even under less-than-ideal circumstances, they would be easy for a party like us to take out. The real question was what to do once we got inside. We needed to get our plan straight. Fortunately, Luna had some ideas.

"They have captives, don't they? The chief's granddaughter and some others. In that case, we should split up," she said.

"I was thinking something similar," I agreed. "It'll make things more complicated if they use the hostages as human shields. One team can take out the thieves while the other team frees the prisoners."

"Okay," said Emma. "I'm with Noir."

"Works for me," Luna agreed. "I'll look for the hostages."

"I'm sure you can handle it, Luna, but be careful."

"My gun and surprise attacks are a match made in heaven. I'm not going to have any trouble."

"No, I mean, what if you pass out...?"

"Oh...right. Yes, I'll be careful."

Luna's seizures weren't a big deal when she had other party members to watch her back, but they could cause a real problem when she was working solo.

We had our plan sorted, so we ate some rations while we waited for the night to grow even deeper. Luckily, the guards were so drunk they started to get

sleepy.

“I think it’s about time we got going.”

“I’ll take the one on the right.”

“Then I’ll take the one on the left.”

Emma and I moved out from the trees and approached the lookouts. Luna’s gun had had a long range, so she stayed put. I was a bit envious, honestly.

Pew! Ka-pow!

I fired off a Stone Bullet at almost the same moment as Luna fired an Energy Shot. The enemies were knocked out nigh simultaneously. Guards subdued, the three of us opened the heavy door and tiptoed down the hallway. The carpet was falling apart with age. The first floor had a ton of rooms, but there was no one in the halls. The thieves were likely sleeping. When we got to the stairs, we heard vulgar laughs echoing from upstairs. It sounded like a group of people were up late drinking.

“Sir Noir,” Luna said. “I think I should continue to search the first floor.”

“Got it. We’ll head upstairs.”

“Be careful, Luna.”

We gave each other a little wave and split up. Emma and I climbed the stairs and were immediately startled. Footsteps were coming toward us.

“Wh-what do we do?”

“From those footsteps...it’s probably just one person. Let’s take them out in one shot. I’ll keep them quiet, so you give ’em a nice gut punch, Emma.”

“Can do.”

The hall at the top of the stairs split into a perfect T-intersection. We hid against the wall and stifled our breath.

A man’s voice sang unevenly down the stairs. “Hmm hmm hmm. I’m the best. I’m the best. I am the best...”

I leapt out at the man and covered his mouth with my hand.

“Mmph?!”

“Emma!”

“Hyah!” Emma let out a short, quiet shout as her fist connected with the thief’s stomach. And with that he...was still conscious. “Huh? I guess I didn’t hit hard enough. There!”

She threw another punch and this time, thankfully, it worked. She really had me panicking there for a second.

“Eh he he, sorry about that.”

She was so cute, I couldn’t hold it against her.

We tied up the thief so he wouldn’t be able to move even if he woke up.

“This strategy really makes your heart pound, huh?” Emma asked.

“You’re excited about this, aren’t you?”

“You could tell? We used to explore together all the time when we were little. Do you remember when we pretended we were sneaking into a thieves’ hideout?”

My memory was actually pretty fuzzy, but I remembered another game that was centered around stealing a treasure back from a wolf den. We had to sneak into a neighbor’s house and past their dog to snatch some sweets. Looking back on it, the whole game was kind of stupid. We didn’t succeed even once.

“See?” said Emma. “All those games we played are paying off.”

“I think that argument feels a little forced, but sure.”

“Eh he he, anyway, let’s just keep going like we have.”

“Yeah. I bet that guy was headed to the bathroom. Let’s take out the guys making all that noise next.”

“Okay! Let’s do it!”

Emma strode down the hall and I followed behind her. I couldn’t help wondering if the boss was in the group we were headed toward. I wasn’t worried about the underlings, but he was supposed to be strong. I braced myself for the confrontation.

Chapter 23:

Wreaking Havoc in the Thieves' Hideout

SEVERAL ROOMS branched off the corridor on the second floor, but one of the doors was half-open. All the merrymaking seemed to be happening in there. Emma and I peered through the gap. A group of five red-faced thieves were drinking and chatting. None of them seemed particularly strong and they were all drunk, so we just charged in. Emma flung the door open and, when they looked our way, I fired a Lightning Strike.

“Gyahh?!”

“Damnit! Who the hell are you?!”

“If you must know, I’m Emma.”

Emma punched each of the thieves in the stomach one after the other as they rushed her. I stood back and supported her with magic. Before long, we’d knocked them all out. Unsurprisingly, we weren’t perfectly silent, but fortunately, none of their comrades came to their aid. We tied them up, then woke one of them by smacking him in the face.

“Where are the hostages?” I asked.

“I-I don’t know.”

“Wanna have another taste of that lightning?”

“No, anything but that, I’ll tell you. Just spare meee!”

Give it a rest, man. Although, on closer inspection, he looked kind of young... Anyway, he coughed up on the information we were after. The hostages were on the first floor, so Luna had made the right call by searching there. The other thieves were asleep in their quarters. Meanwhile, the boss was in the room at the far end of the second floor.

“We can leave the hostages for Luna. I think we should go ahead and take out the rest of the thieves.”

“Good idea. It’ll be easy if we can attack them while they’re sleeping.”

“All right, let’s keep going, but be careful.”

We checked each room, one after the other. Each one had about four people sleeping in it. It was almost shocking how easy it was to take them out, and, with each room we cleared, we reduced their fighting strength. We left the boss for last.

“Okay, Emma, remember, this last guy is the most dangerous.”

“G-got it. I’m kinda nervous now.”

“We make a good team. I’m positive we can beat him if we work together.”

“Let’s do this, Noir.”

We braced ourselves and opened the door. It was pitch black. Maybe he was asleep? We readied our weapons and approached the bed, but it was empty.

“He’s not here...”

“Wh-where did he go?”

We wondered aloud if he might have just not been in the room, but I had a bad feeling, so I looked up—and found a man on the ceiling, clinging to it like some kind of spider.

“Emma, look out!”

“Eeek!”

I narrowly saved Emma from the enemy above. That was close.

“I thought I heard something suspicious. So we do have intruders.”

The man glared at us in the dark—he was tall and had a toned, muscular body. His aura was overwhelmingly powerful; it was suffocating to be in the same room as him. He wasn’t wearing any armor and was lightly dressed. He only had a single knife, but I was so tense I couldn’t move a muscle.

I did have the courage to use my Discerning Eye. His name was Ahgalga Burrone. He was thirty two years old and Level 118. Just as I’d feared, he was on a completely different level from the other thieves. He had a ton of skills too: Night Vision, C-Grade Level Break, B-Grade Short Swords, Pillar of Fire, Faithful

Short Sword, and C-Grade Pocket Dimension.

I was curious about that Level Break skill, but I didn't have time to check it out. Ahgalga dropped into a low stance and swooshed toward us, brandishing his knife. He wasn't just swinging randomly either, every one of his attacks was meant to inflict a fatal wound.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"What do we want?" I said. "What would you do if I said we just wanted to let loose and have a little fun?"

"You're one cheeky bastard, kid."

Ahgalga grazed my bangs with his knife, giving me a slight haircut. Everything about him was razor-sharp. Emma and I fought back, but we were losing ground. Every time I tried to create enough space to cast a spell, Ahgalga closed the distance and tripped me up. Nothing could have been more irritating.

As Emma and I exchanged looks, Ahgalga inexplicably turned tail and ran.

"Huh? Why did he run?"

"I wonder... oh! He might be going for the hostages."

"We have to hurry!"

We dashed for the first floor, keeping our eyes peeled for any surprise attacks. As we descended the stairs, we heard a gunshot. Ahgalga had found Luna. We flung open a door and they were going toe-to-toe. About ten anxious women cowered behind Luna.

"Tsk, you just don't know when to quit, do you?" Ahgalga snapped at us. Nevertheless, he could tell the odds weren't in his favor, so he escaped through the window.

"These are the people they kidnapped," Luna told us breathlessly.

"Thought so. I'm glad no one seems hurt."

"Is the chief's granddaughter here?"

"That's me... So my grandpa hired some adventurers after all, huh?" She was utterly lovely and, to be honest, didn't resemble her grandfather very much at

all.

“We lost the boss,” said Luna. “What should we do next, Sir Noir?”

“We gotta go after him.”

I didn’t want to let the boss get away. We’d taken out the rest of the thieves, so we left the women in the hideout and headed out. To our surprise, Ahgalga was waiting for us just outside. His eyes gleamed with intimidating force.

“I considered escaping, but then I realized I couldn’t stand the thought of handing a victory to a bunch of pipsqueaks like you.”

He was brimming with confidence, but I guess you’d have to be to make it as the head of a band of thieves. I saw the situation as an opportunity, so I was more than ready to take him up the challenge. If he thought he stood a chance in a three-on-one showdown, he really was fearless.

However, the source of his confidence became abundantly clear when I looked into his skills in more detail.

Level Break was a skill that forcibly lowered the levels of all living creatures within a fifty-yard radius. Even the C-Grade variant caused a 20-level drop and, when I checked, we’d all been affected. It wasn’t a passive skill, so he was actively using it. Ugh, I knew I’d felt weird. I should have noticed that my strength, agility, and magic were all reduced! I made sure to warn Emma and Luna.

“That’s cheating!”

“What a pain in the ass.”

“Tsk, you pipsqueaks have someone with Discerning Eye? That explains how so few of you managed to sneak into my hideout.”

“Sir Noir,” said Luna. “I’m going to step back.”

“Yeah, please do.”

Luna scurried off to escape the range of Ahgalga’s skill. Our close-range spells were basically useless, but Luna could launch a powerful attack with her magical firearm from outside the affected area. I couldn’t tell if Ahgalga realized exactly what we were up to, but he readied himself to pursue Luna all the same.

“I don’t—”

“—think so!”

Emma and I shot off spells to stop him from pursuing our cleric.

“Why you little!” Ahgalga threw his knife with a snap of the wrist, but both Emma and I evaded. It flew between the two of us and Ahgalga clicked his tongue. “You aren’t even worth my time. Look up at the moon, silently watching over our battle to the death. What does our future hold? Will I die or will you? Isn’t it exhilarating?”

Oookay, he wasn’t right in the head. It sent a chill down my spine.

“Huh?! Noir!” Emma suddenly knocked me out of the way.

“What in the...” Something shot past me. The pain informed me that I’d been cut. “The knife...went back to him?”

“He he he...” Ahgalga gleefully snatched the handle of the knife as it returned to him. That seemed to be his Faithful Short Sword ability. If Emma hadn’t pushed me out of the way, I might have lost my head. My senses really were dulled. Another effect of my reduced level? What an irritating skill.

“You really saved me,” I said.

“Well, you saved me earlier. Now we’re even,” Emma said with a smile.

“Healing Shot!” cried Luna.

A ball of white light sank into my wound and I was healed in an instant. Luna wore a cool smirk as I flashed her a thumbs up.

“Oh, that half-elf girl isn’t half-bad.”

“The name’s Luna Heela, you better remember it.”

“I’ll consider it, if you manage to threaten my life even a little. I remember everyone strong enough to try to kill me.” Ahgalga wasn’t scared or even flustered. Conversely, his sublimely casual demeanor instilled more than a bit of fear in me. He hardly seemed human. We had managed to take out all of his underlings, so numbers-wise we had the advantage, and yet...

Skills aside, I guess you had to have a certain amount of nerve to get through

so many battles. Ahgalga's attitude wasn't something a total chicken like me could understand.

"With your abilities and mental fortitude," I said, "you could be a total success in a more upstanding line of work. You could make a living doing something else."

"You seem to have a pretty high opinion of me, pipsqueak. Why do people always think they have the right to lecture others about their way of life when they don't know a damn thing about them?"

"Maybe *because* they don't know anything about them?"

"It's all just self-aggrandizing crap. But if you must know... Heh. I was born in another kingdom. Ever since I can remember, I lived in the gutter. I never even knew my parents. What do you make of that?"

I just stared at him without responding, quietly looking him over.

"I saw other children murdered like they were nothing. So, when I turned seven, I made up my mind. I wasn't going to be a victim, I was going to be the one doing the taking."

I felt a little bad for him, but to be honest, I wasn't actually listening. I wanted him talking to buy us some time—time that I could use to calmly and carefully use Editor on him.

"Are you listening, pipsqueak?!"

"I heard every word. As someone who was raised by loving parents, I was just stunned by the difference in our upbringing."

"Heh, good. Well, I give less of a damn about my parents than yesterday's breakfast. Lemme tell you about the time I took down the boss of the slums."

Luckily for me, he kept going, and I got a few more precious seconds to try and find a way to break his most troublesome skill.

Chapter 24:

The Boss of the Thieves

WELL, THINGS weren't looking good. After investigating Ahgalga's skills with Editor, it was clear that any changes were going to require heaps of LP. His most irritating skills, C-Grade Level Break and Faithful Short Sword, required well over 2,000 LP to undermine. It might have been that way because he heavily relied on them, or maybe he just had a particular affinity for them.

B-Grade Short Swords and Pillar of Fire were no better. But it did look like I could do something with his Night Vision and C-Grade Pocket Dimension...

"Don't you get it? I've always carved my own path in life. Don't get too cocky just because you took out my men."

Ahgalga finally seemed to be done telling his life story. He grabbed his knife again. I could sense his renewed hostility.

"I've grown bored of talking. Ready to die?" He growled and threw his knife at me. It flew over my head, but I couldn't rest easy. The blade was definitely coming back.

"Don't take your eyes off the prize." Ahgalga swished his arm around and I saw flashes of metal with each movement. He was throwing multiple knives. I couldn't tell where they were coming from—they just seemed to appear out of nowhere.

"He's using his Pocket Dimension," I said when I realized.

It was getting harder to avoid the knives. Emma and I had our guard up, knocking them out of the air with our own blades. Throughout all this, Luna kept firing at Ahgalga, but he read the trajectory of her shots every time and dodged each bullet with the least amount of movement possible.

"Is that all you got, my dear intruders? Entertain me more! Try to threaten my life!" Ahgalga threw five or six knives into the air while Emma and I tried desperately to knock them away.

We were too slow.

“Oh no!”

One of the blades pierced the toe of my boot. If it had been just a fraction of an inch further up my foot, I would have had a real hard time moving.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! That panicked look is my favorite thing in the world.”

Luna’s attacks couldn’t even disrupt Ahgalga’s concentration. He just laughed. He was *terrifying*.

“Aaah?! My hair pin!” Emma looked absolutely enraged as one of his knives knocked off her hair pin. She quickly retrieved it, glaring at Ahgalga.

“Why so mad, little girl? That thing doesn’t even look expensive. It’s just some cheap trinket.”

“The price isn’t what makes it valuable!”

“Then what does?”

“This is...it’s...”

Emma’s fists trembled, but standing still like that put her in danger—one of Ahgalga’s knives was aimed right at her throat! But she nimbly lifted one of her own daggers and slapped it away. I’d never seen anyone slap a knife before...

“This is a treasure I got from Noir! I can’t put a price on it...well, if I really had to, I’d say it was worth ten billion rels, no, ten trillion!”

The indignant Emma charged at Ahgalga. She might have been worked up, but she still had her wits about her. She cast Run Like the Wind, but without backup, fighting Ahgalga in close combat was rough.

“Hyah!”

Once I’d knocked the last flying dagger out of the air, I frantically worked on Editing Ahgalga’s Night Vision. I decided to change “vision is improved in the dark” by removing “improved” for 300 LP. It wasn’t that expensive, so I didn’t hesitate. Since the removal of that word invalidated the whole skill, it disappeared.

“Ngh! Wh-what?! Why is everything so dark?”

While Ahgalga faltered, Emma kicked him with all her might. He fell back but quickly regained his balance. Even partially blinded, he had no trouble blocking Emma's strikes and continued to watch for Luna's attacks too. He even managed a counterattack against me.

"It was you, wasn't it?! I knew you were acting funny."

"You caught me!"

More knives flew and I tried mimicking his technique. I pulled a knife out of my Pocket Dimension and threw it. With the aid of my Throwing skill, I hit the mark. The two knives clashed into each other and toppled to the ground.

"Interesting. This is going to be a fun match."

I had no interest in a head-to-head confrontation. I wanted to tweak his Pocket Dimension skill next, but I only had 500 LP left, and I'd need all of it to do any Edit I could think of. So basically, I'd have to die. And if I pulled out some money to use my LP Conversion skill, Ahgalga would probably use the opportunity to attack.

Instead, I tried adding a line to his Pocket Dimension skill description: "sometimes fails." It cost me 200 LP. It wouldn't perfectly undermine the skill, but hopefully, it would give me the edge I needed.

Good enough, I thought, but my successful Edit wasn't without its tradeoffs.

With my LP down to 300, I took a serious hit to my physical condition. My master told me before that, if I left my LP in this reduced state for too long, it'd also reduce my lifespan.

I dropped down on one knee, but I endured and threw another knife. Ahgalga sparred with Emma with his left hand, danced around Luna's bullets, and kept throwing blades in my direction with his right.

I had to concentrate. That was key. I had to keep up with him. I got my chance on our third volley. Ahgalga made a practiced throwing motion, but nothing came out of his hand.

That was my chance! While he was thrown off, I threw a knife and nailed him in the arm.

“Guhhh...”

With that, I finally did some meaningful damage. Emma followed through and landed a debilitating slice on his other arm. Now both of his arms were disabled.

“This is what you get for being bad!” she shouted.

“Sh-shut your mouth, little girl. I still have my legs.”

“Then how about we do something about those too?”

Luna fired off an Energy Shot, hitting him in the legs. With such severe wounds all over his body, even someone like Ahgalga couldn’t remain on his feet.

“Give up already.”

“Yeah, you’re gonna be in for some serious pain otherwise.”

“...”

Ahgalga didn’t seem to care. He just looked up at the moon. The only thing that got a reaction out of him was Luna.

“We don’t intend to take your life,” she said. “We’d rather you live and make up for your crimes.”

“Make up for my crimes?” Ahgalga snorted. “Of all the evil people I’ve met in my life, none of them could manage that.”

“That’s no excuse not to try. Plus, even those people will ultimately be judged by the gods.”

Her beautiful words converted Ahgalga... Yeah, just kidding. He spat on the ground and glared.

“The only one who’ll be judging me is *me*. And don’t you forget it.”

“Luna, look down!”

The ground Luna was standing on started to burn red. Luna leapt to the side and in the next instant, a pillar of raging fire shot up toward the sky. She would’ve been done for if it had hit.

Ahgalga likely hadn't used that spell until just now because it took a lot of magic. His breathing was ragged, but he still didn't seem concerned and fired off a second spell.

"Don't you think you should use that power to help people?!" Luna cried as she fired an Energy Shot with all her might. It just grazed Ahgalga's stomach. She collapsed before she even saw where it landed. She'd used too much magic and knocked herself out...

"Ha ha ha, you're worthless after all. You're all too soft to make a point."

"Soft? But you're severely injured."

"She coulda hit me in the heart, right? But she just grazed my side. She probably thought another hit would kill me. What a sweet girl, sweeter than honey."

"That's because, as I said, we aren't here to kill you. Come on, Emma."

I didn't think Ahgalga could move anymore, but just to be sure, we pinned him from behind. He must've been in serious pain, but he kept talking.

"You're wasting your life to save others? Come on, pipsqueak, your skills and magic are for your own use. I know you agree."

"I...I won't hesitate to use my power to save those close to me," I said.

"Ha! I see you're sweet too!"

"Noir, get off him!"

"Guh!"

A glowing red circle had formed on the ground. I hadn't expected Ahgalga to use Pillar of Fire right there. I mean, he was inside—

Just as we got back, he burst into flames.

"Ha ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha! Perfect! Just perfeeect!"

The fire stretched up toward the moon. I couldn't believe it. He kept laughing as his body burned and didn't stop until he died.

In the end, Ahgalga was just a villain. But I couldn't help feeling that if his circumstances had been different, he might have become a great hero.

I couldn't respect his choice of actions, but I did want to learn something from his unbreakable spirit. That determination was something I was particularly lacking in.

With the tension broken, I felt like I was about to collapse. I would have fallen face first into the ground if Emma hadn't supported me. "Used too much LP, huh?"

"Something like that."

"Just hang in there, I'll do everything I can." She wasn't lying about that, either. She laid my head in her lap and stroked my hair and showered me with kisses. "Still feeling bad? Then how about this." Emma nibbled on my ear.

"Why did you go for that?!"

"Well, you did it to me before, remember? I always wanted to get you back for that. Really makes you go weak in the knees, huh?"

"Ahhh, I think that's the opposite of what we want right now." I felt all the energy drain from my body but, at the same time, energy coursed through me. When I checked, I had earned several hundred LP. "You're incredible, Emma."

"Yay, it worked! As a thank you, I want you to popularize this phrase."

"What phrase?"

"All you need is a best friend!"

Was she trying to antagonize every lonely person in the world?

I might have recovered, but Luna was still on the ground, so we hurried to her side. Luna was always so beautiful and collected, but when she had one of her seizure attacks her eyes rolled back in her head.

"H-he's...so scary..."

And she would say exactly what she was feeling. She must have been scared to death of that Pillar of Fire. Thankfully, she didn't seem to be physically injured. When we told her what became of Ahgalga, she even looked sad. "Oh. I was hoping I could change his mind..."

"I think you could've tortured him and he still wouldn't have budged. You'll

probably have a better chance with the other thieves.”

“Yes, you’re probably right. The kidnapped women are waiting for us, too. We should head back.”

“Yeah.”

It was a hard fight, but we had at last defeated the band of thieves, and we returned to the hideout to catch our breath.

Chapter 25:

Triumphant Return

IT WAS DANGEROUS to move at night, so we stayed at the hideout until morning. Even once the sun came up, we couldn't bring the thieves with us. There were just too many of them. So we tied them up to pillars inside the hideout and escorted the hostages down the mountain.

The footing was bad, and there were monster attacks to deal with, but we safely got everyone to the road. We could finally relax.

"You guys all did great. We're almost back to the village."

"Mr. Noir, doesn't something seem a little odd?" the chief's granddaughter said, looking closely at the entrance to the village.

What did she see?

"There should always be someone near the entrance."

"Oh boy, do you think it came back?" I asked my party.

I'd nearly forgotten about the magic eater. If it was back, we needed to protect the hostages.

"I'm going to ask you all to wait out here," I told them. "We'll go check it out."

When we got to the village, we confirmed that the problem was, indeed, the magic eater. There weren't any villagers around, so hopefully they were hiding. For now, Tigerson was holding his own against the monster, though I noticed something odd as the two faced each other.

"Huh, doesn't the eater look a little beaten up?"

"Yeah...it totally does."

Its skin was torn up and it was covered in dirt, almost as if it had tumbled down a few rocky slopes. Tigerson, on the other hand, didn't have any visible wounds. Was he winning?

<Ooh, you came at an excellent time, Noir.>

"Sorry for making you wait so long, Tigerson."

<No trouble at all. How were things on your end?>

“We managed to save everyone, thankfully.”

<I would expect no less of my good friend. Now, about this creature.> “Grrrr...”

The large mouth on the magic eater’s stomach was drooling, not in hunger, but in pain.

<I have been diligently knocking it away ever since it reappeared. It may have strong resistance to physical attacks, but it is not immune to damage. I thought I might win in a battle of attrition.> Holy crap. It must have taken tens, or even hundreds, of hits. I almost felt bad for it.

<I thought about this very hard all night. The creature grows stronger when it consumes magic. As such, I concluded that it would be best to use only attacks that it could not consume.> “Well, it looks like you were right.”

Luckily, Tigerson had both the strength and stamina to make that strategy work.

<However, my attacks always seem to be just slightly lacking.> “We can help with that.”

<In that case, I would like you to come at it from behind. For some reason, it seems to particularly dislike taking hits to the stomach, but it also seems to be able to move its vulnerable spot to its back.> It had made mouths appear on its arms and legs when it consumed our spells, but the big mouth on its stomach seemed to be different. It couldn’t be retracted, but I guess it could be moved? Tigerson’s plan certainly seemed worth a try.

This time Tigerson and I made sure to attack together. It would be a pain if the eater ate Luna’s shot, and Emma’s range was just too short. It wasn’t hard for me to get around behind the monster either, since it moved so slowly.

The real challenge was yet to come. As the creature squared off against Tigerson, it looked over its shoulder at me. I made eye contact with Tigerson, and he made the first move. He charged the eater from the front while I charged in from behind. Tigerson tried to tear open the eater’s stomach with his mighty claws—and he was right! Just before his claws made contact, the mouth disappeared and reappeared on the creature’s back.

“Take this, big mouth!” I stabbed the tip of my blade right into the eater’s purple tongue.

“Hnnngh?!” It let out a small shriek that was hard to describe, then fell over and stopped moving.

How anticlimactic.

“Kind of crazy how it went down that easily once we found its weakness...”

I did earn a number of levels, though. It might have been a ravenous glutton, but in the end, it served as a delicious experience-point meal.

<I see my reasoning was accurate. Heh, I feel as if I could shout for joy.>

Tigerson had a lot of combat experience, so he had a keen mind for that sort of thing. However invincible that creature might have seemed, it was still a living being, so he knew it had to have a weak point. And here I couldn’t even come up with a way to circumvent its Consume Magic skill. At least now I knew better for next time.

A cheerful atmosphere took the village when we called the villagers out of hiding and brought all the hostages home.

“I don’t know how we could possibly thank you.”

“Grandpa...”

They must have missed each other desperately, because both the chief and his granddaughter started crying. They planned a festival to celebrate being freed from the thieves, and we were invited, but we couldn’t stay. We needed to get back to the guild posthaste and call for soldiers to arrest the remaining thieves.

“Well, please come back and visit again when you have time. We’ll be waiting.”

“I’m going to live my life on the right path from now on! I wish you all luck!”

The chief and Good Guy saw us off as we headed back.

“So, uh, was I...a good leader?” I asked timidly as we rode home on Tigerson’s back.

“You were perfect,” Emma said.

“I think you had sound judgement and took appropriate action. I believe this trip really highlighted your strongest qualities, Sir Noir.”

<Truthfully, I think you might be more suited to leadership than you realize.> I was glad to hear it. I probably wouldn't have gotten perfect marks, but it was definitely a passing grade at least.

We reported back to the guild on the morning of the fourth day of our long weekend. Lola jumped for joy at the sight of us and couldn't stop smiling.

“If anyone could pull it off, I knew it would be you, Mr Noir!”

“We defeated a magic eater, too. We didn't get any materials from it, though since it was, uh, pretty gross.”

“Wow! You're already the ace of Odin, Mr. Noir. I'd have nothing to complain about if you married me now. Well...enough joking. I'll go call for the soldiers to collect the thieves. After that, you should be promoted to Grade C.”

Lola and everyone else in the guild congratulated me and celebrated my success. I was truly happy. Now we would be able to enter Treasure Mountain to hunt dragons for our exam. Unfortunately, Emma was a total wet blanket.

“Hey! What about me?”

“You're still in Grade D, Ms. Emma.”

“What? You shouldn't be hostile to me just because we're romantic rivals.”

“I'm doing nothing of the sort. Mr. Noir joined up before you and has completed more requests, that's all.”

Now that she mentioned it, that did sound right. Emma didn't always join me on missions, but the difference in our scores couldn't be *that* big. She was likely only a couple requests behind.

“Then I'll go out and hunt some monsters right now!”

We had just returned from a harrowing expedition, but Emma went right back out. She had so much energy.

I knew she would be fine on her own for a few solo requests, so we split up and I went home. I planned on getting some much needed sleep, but I got no such opportunity. It was still a holiday, so my family dragged me out into town for some fun.

Together, we nosed around to find new restaurants. I got to try fried scorpion and other exotic stuff like that. It was kind of creepy, but ultimately unbelievably tasty. The outing also ended up being something of a happy accident, since it earned me almost 1,000 LP.

That evening, I got even more good news: Emma made it to Grade C, and we had dinner together to celebrate.

“Uuuugh, I’m so stuffed I can’t move an inch. Let me sleep in Alice’s room tonight,” said Emma.

“Only if you promise not to attack my brother in his sleep,” said Alice.

“I wouldn’t do that. What do you think I am?”

“A bloodthirsty...no, more like a home-wrecker.”

“Hey, Noir, does Alice hate me or something?”

Emma looked like she was about to burst into tears, so I comforted her by saying it was just Alice’s sense of humor. My sister had a tendency to blurt out some pretty strange comments.

Before I fell asleep, I contemplated my next moves. I still had plenty of time before the end of Lola and Sarah’s battle, and the deadline for our exam was a ways off too. I didn’t want to rush into taking out that dragon without preparing. It was probably stronger than the enemies we’d faced on this last mission. But with careful preparation, I was sure we had a shot at victory.

To be totally honest, my greatest strength was cowardly tactics. I didn’t particularly enjoy courageous frontal attacks or daring gambits. Unfortunately, I was much better suited to more conservative or even underhanded approaches.

But despite all that, as a leader, the most important thing was ensuring my party’s safety. That at least I could be confident about.

Chapter 26:

Lola's Special Massage Course

CLASSES AT HERO ACADEMY started up again the very next day. After taking on the extra missions to make Grade C in our guild, Emma was exhausted and out with a stomachache. Thankfully, it didn't sound particularly serious. The classroom was a sea of gloomy faces that morning. I couldn't blame them. I mean, who wants to go back to class after a long weekend? Unfortunately, our school, and especially the S-Class homeroom teacher, never went easy on us.

When the door opened and Ms. Elena stepped in, her eyes were more severe than usual. You could have cut the tension with a knife.

Ms. Elena was in her early twenties and wore makeup that gave her a mysterious air. She was well-proportioned, and her body was toned from her many years as a mercenary. She had a pretty face, too, so I always thought she could have been a model if she had a—how shall I put it—a more forgiving personality.

“One holiday and you all look like a bunch of little slackers. All right, get up, we're going outside. Skin doesn't just snap back once it gets stretched out. I want twenty laps around the yard.”

Ms. Elena's Spartan theory of education was going strong. While the rest of us felt like crying, we knew arguing would only add to our torments, so we all trudged out to the schoolyard. With my class, I ran the twenty laps as fast as I could and came in third.

“You three are elite soldiers.” Ms. Elena offered a reward to the top three: she came by and ruffled our hair. “There you go. Good job. Keep up the good work.”

Was that her idea of a reward now...? I would have rather she sat on me again.

“By the way, how are you doing with your exam?” she asked me.

“It’s going pretty well, I think.”

“Noir. You’re not doing something crazy like planning to hunt a dragon, are you?”

“What if I am? Wouldn’t it be safer to teach me a little bit about dragons?”

I thought she might give me something if I put it like that, but she shook her head. It was against the rules to tip students off. Made sense.

“If you want my advice, I think you’d be better off giving up on a dragon hunt. If you focused on the other two options, you could make a top score easily, Noir.”

“Hm. If it gets too dangerous, I will.”

“I just don’t want you making a bad call. Plenty of things are more important than exam scores. Like your life. Or the lives of your friends.”

“Really, I appreciate the concern. But I swear I’m not going to push myself past my limits.”

Despite my assurances, Ms. Elena’s expression didn’t brighten. She was genuinely worried. Did I really seem that hopeless?

Thanks to the adrenaline boost from the run, I had an easier time concentrating on class. Judging by my classmates’ attitudes, I wasn’t the only one. Ms. Elena knew how to handle us.

After class, Maria caught me while I was getting ready to go home. We talked about the exam, I checked up on her health (still good, whew), and then it was just some regular chitchat. After a bit, her expression softened.

“I still haven’t repaid you for all you’ve done for me, Mr. Noir. If there is anything that I might be able to assist you with, please, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Please, you’ve done more than enough. You even became my friend.”

“I suppose, but I still don’t feel right. Are you certain there isn’t a thing I could do? I do know I am rather limited in my abilities, but...”

She seemed so down, I just had to rack my brain for something.

“Oh, well, in that case...”

I finally came up with an idea—something small, but meaningful—and I whispered it to her.

“I would do so happily! I shall be ready whenever you like.”

“Let’s wait until everyone else goes home then.”

We hung around to wait for the rest of the students to leave and, when it was just the two of us, we began. Maria stood directly in front of me, once more wearing one of her elegant white dresses. My heart was pounding way more than I expected.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“Wh-whenever you are.”

I gently wrapped my arms around Maria, and she hugged me back. Her supple flesh against my body made me want to sigh, but I was afraid of sounding like a creep, so I held it in. Still, I didn’t last long. I let go as soon as I got the LP.

“Could you explain the benefit of doing this?” Maria asked.

“It’s a little weird, but I have to do this sort of thing to get stronger. I promise I don’t have any ulterior motives.”

“Of course! If it’ll help, Mr. Noir, have another.”

“Ahhh...!” She squeezed me so suddenly I couldn’t hold back an awkward moan. “L-L-Lady Maria,” I stammered. “It won’t do anything again so soon.”

“Then we ought to do it at regular intervals. Hm. Would it be better to keep this secret from others?”

“Yes, please.”

“Tee hee, very well.”

If the other boys in the class found out I got to do this with Maria, they would lay into me with unholy wrath. At any rate, I was happy to have gained another source of LP, but I had to wonder what it meant for my relationship with Maria. If I had to give this little episode a title, it’d probably be something like “Secret Liaison with the Duke’s Daughter.”

Ugh, I’m such a nerd.

My party and I were taking a bit of a break from adventuring activities while we worked independently to gather information on the dragon. As such, after I said goodbye to Maria, I headed to the guild to meet up with Lola. She had also asked me to come by when I had some time.

“I see you’re hard at work again today,” I said. “Good job.”

“I could say the same of you, Mr. Noir. Keeping up with school while adventuring on the side is no easy task. Oh, are you here about what I mentioned last time? I just so happen to have that special something I wanted to give you.”

She rummaged around, looking around to make sure no one was watching before she slipped her hand into her shirt. I had no idea what she was doing. From within, she produced a rectangular slip of paper.

“This is just between us, but I kept it in my cleavage.”

“W-wow, it’s so warm!”

“Heh, that coupon is just for you.”

The following was written on the slip: “Touch Me Anywhere Coupon, redeemable only by Noir. (*Please note that this coupon is only for a massage on any part of Noir’s person. You’ll have to wait for a different coupon to touch Lola!)”

“Do you want me to explain in more detail?” Lola asked.

“No! I think I got the idea!”

“Good, that saves me some time, then. Wanna redeem it now?”

I didn’t think I could possibly do that in such a public place, especially as my perfectly-healthy-teenage-boy mind immediately leapt to the most indecent possible “anywhere.” Though it wasn’t like I couldn’t use it for a shoulder rub. If anything, that was probably the most gentlemanly option. Lola gave a killer shoulder rub.

One of the other receptionists came by to tell Lola she could take her break. This was clearly part of Lola’s plan, but she pretended it was a coincidence.

“Oh, it even looks like I have some free time on my hands now. Why don’t we slip into that room over there? It’s empty.”

And that’s how I ended up all alone in a room with Lola.

“I’m kinda nervous about this,” I admitted. “Someone could open the door at any moment...”

“Just relax. No one comes in here.” Lola was thoroughly prepared. I wasn’t really a fan of how calculating she could be. She definitely wasn’t someone to antagonize. “Now, you don’t have to hold back. Do it for the LP, Mr. Noir.”

“Could you...uh, loosen my tight shoulders for me?”

“If that’s what you’re after, I would personally recommend you try Lola’s Special Massage Course!”

“I guess I’ll go with that then.”

All things said and done, I didn’t feel like I had much of an option in the end. But I also quickly learned that it wasn’t the wrong choice. Lola gave it her all as she earnestly worked to loosen my tired muscles. She massaged my shoulders and back, and the foot massage was heavenly. As she kneaded, she told me that she practiced every day on her mother’s feet.

“A receptionist’s job isn’t just to tender requests for adventurers. We have to support our adventurers too, and do whatever we can to give them the energy to keep going. Of course, you’re the only one getting this particular service, Mr. Noir.”

Adventuring was pretty tough sometimes, but if you asked me, her job seemed even harder, and I readily told her so.

“Ha ha, it really is! I have to deal with rude and crass adventurers, rivals bullying me, and listening to the complaints of my boss’s family members.” It really did sound tough. But Lola’s attitude instantly did a one-eighty and she was soon back to her boundlessly cheerful self. “So, you know, it makes me happy that you come in so regularly for requests. Okay, all done.”

My body felt amazing. I was completely relaxed and totally melting. If I didn’t know any better, I’d have said my muscles themselves were overjoyed.

“Thank you. That felt indescribably good.”

“Well, if you keep up the good work, I’ll give you all sorts of other coupons.”

“That’s kind of exciting.”

“Isn’t it just? I hope you look forward to the surprises I have in store,” Lola said with a wink.

She made sure I left the guild feeling refreshed, relieved, and ready to take on the world.



Chapter 27:

Anti-Dragon Countermeasures

WITH A NEW BOUNCE in my step, I headed to the hidden dungeon. This time, I had no intention of exploring. My main objective was to consult with my master, Olivia. I headed straight for her room on the second floor.

<You finally came back, Noir, my kindred spirit.>

"I wish you'd knock it off with that. I know you just think it sounds cool."

<Actually, I just remembered something.>

"Remembered what?"

<When I was alive, I hardly had any friends.>

"Technically, you're still alive. You have a future ahead of you too." And to be honest, she didn't really come off as the type that needed friends or dedicated romantic partners in the first place.

<Enough about me... What's next for you? The eighth floor was it?>

"Maybe next time. Today I'm here to talk to you."

<Oh, now that just brings a tear to my eye. I've been dying to use this one line I read in a collection of famous phrases. Mind if I go for it? 'I'm glad I'm alive!>

I had to wonder where she got all that energy from. She was even psychically cackling. Though really, talking to her always got me fired up too.

"I told you how I wanted to get dragon parts for an exam at school, right?" I said. "I'm thinking about hunting one down together with some friends of mine, but I was hoping you had strategic advice."

<The thing about dragons is that you have to change your approach drastically depending on the specific type of dragon you're facing. I think the toughest varieties would be a liiiittle too much for you to handle right now.>

Olivia was nice about it, but basically she was saying I had no chance in hell of succeeding. That said, I'd heard that the dragons on Treasure Mountain

weren't, comparatively, all that powerful. In fact, Lola had told me that the main reason none of the higher-grade adventurers had taken the request to go after them was because the compensation was too low.

<Okay, okay, don't make that disappointed face. I'm sure you'll find a way to manage, Noir. You'll just need to make yourself some new dragon-whupping skills!>

"Then please, tell me more."

<But first, do you respect poor old Olivia as your master?>

"Of course I do."

<Then prove how much you admire me.>

She was off on another ridiculous tangent again. I had to play ball, or she wouldn't either. What to do, what to do? First, I tried stroking her hair.

<I'm not a child, you know.>

"Okay, then how about this?"

I ran my hand down her back instead, which seemed to earn me more points. Then her stomach. *That* she seemed to like a lot.

<Mm, why don't you move your hand just a little lower.>

"No thanks."

<Don't you want to know more about those dragons?>

"If you insist..."

I gently stroked her thighs and she finally gave in.

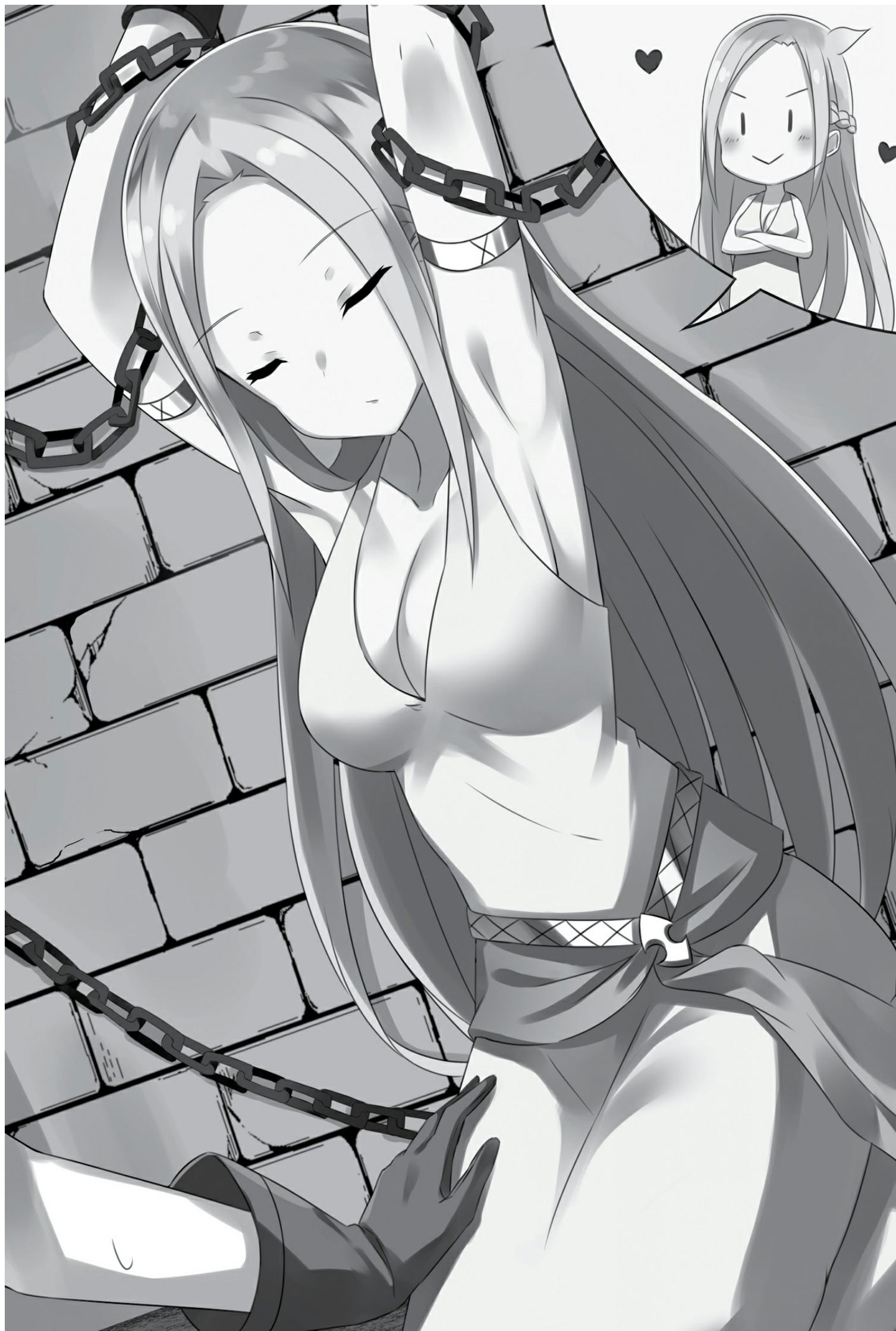
<Okay, I'll give you a pass. You sure tried hard enough.>

"I'm glad you still have some shred of conscience left."

<Now this isn't the only trick that beastie will have up its scaly sleeve, but to start, most dragons have a skill called Menace, and it's far and away more trouble than anything a regular monster could throw at you. You'll freeze in your tracks and your knees will give out. But from a defensive perspective...>

From there, she went on to tell me all sorts of things about dragons, from

skills to watch out for to offensive skills that might just get me out of this hunt with a prime set of dragon teeth.



The first step in my new plan was to earn a decent chunk of LP. I needed three skills before I could even think of going up against a dragon: Courage, Hearing Protection, and Dragon Killer. Courage would cost me 1,000 LP, though Hearing Protection was only 800, but Dragon Killer was 2,000 just for the C-Grade variant. It jumped to 5,000 for the B-Grade version.

The first two skills were focused on defense. Courage would counteract Menace, though even with it, if the enemy was too strong, it would still be rough. Better with than without, though, right? Similarly, Hearing Protection would stop my eardrums from rupturing if the dragon roared while I was in close quarters.

The last one was exactly what it sounded like: Dragon Killer, a specialized offensive skill against dragons. But it wasn't without issues. I wasn't sure what exactly to Bestow it on, for one. There wasn't much point in just giving it to myself. That might be worth it if I fought with my hands, but I relied heavily on weapons, so I'd have to plan on punching the thing if I did that.

Therefore, Bestowing Dragon Killer on a weapon was by far the better idea. But then, if I Bestowed it on my trusty two-edged blade, I was cornering myself into close-quarters combat, and I kind of wanted to stay at range. It didn't really matter how strong the skill was if I couldn't actually cut my enemy with it.

Unable to decide, I set the issue aside for the time being and focused on acquiring the defensive skills. All around, I was determined to be more proactive.

As night fell, I ran into Luna on my way home. She had just finished her work as a cleric for the day.

"Do you feel like getting dinner together?" she asked.

"Absolutely. My stomach won't stop growling."

"Heh. Well, let's find a good restaurant then."

Restaurant? Wait...I had a sudden flash of inspiration and I made a suggestion to Luna.

“Since we’re going out to eat, why don’t we try a restaurant that specializes in unusual cuisine? I went to a really amazing place like that with my family during the holiday.”

“Oh, I see. You think this might be helpful for the fight against that dragon.”

“Yeah, it’ll earn me some LP.”

In agreement, we headed to the restaurant in question. Even though it was peak dining hours, the restaurant was practically empty.

“A bit of a ghost town, hm?”

“The food’s great, but, yeah...”

No matter how you tried to dress up the dubious cuisine at this joint, it didn’t have the best image. In my opinion, people would have changed their tune if they just tried the food. I had the fried scorpion the last time I went, so I ordered something different this time around. Deep-fried mealworms seemed like a good choice. On my suggestion, Luna ordered the fried scorpion and, to go with it, some viper liquor.

Our meals got to the table quickly, probably because of the lack of other customers.

“This is admittedly...shocking, visually.” Luna might have been mature, but she was still kind of girly about bugs. I felt bad for dragging her along when I saw the tears in her eyes.

“Please, don’t force yourself. I’ll eat it if you can’t, it won’t go to waste.”

“No, I ordered it, I want to try... Who knows, it might introduce me to a whole new culinary world. I-I’ve always thought that’s a good attitude to cultivate.”

Despite Luna’s brave words, she still had tears in her eyes. Personally, I found my selection more disgusting than the scorpion. My plate was covered in a pile of what looked like earthworms. I poked them gently. They had been fried, so they were firm on the outside. I summoned my courage and put one on my tongue, closed my eyes, and chomped down.

“Ooh!”

I was a little embarrassed by my own outburst, but I couldn’t help it. It was so

crunchy and juicy and absolutely delicious! Once I started, I couldn't stop. Before long, I'd decimated the mountain of mealworms.

Luna seemed to have grown less averse to her meal as well. She was steadily sipping the viper liquor. Admittedly, the liquid in the cup wasn't particularly offensive to behold. Although, if you looked closely, you could pick out fine bits of snakeskin floating within it.

Soon, the both of us were so engrossed in our meals we forgot to talk. Happily for me, the meal earned me a tidy 800 LP and I immediately used it to acquire Hearing Protection.

Plop! Luna flopped over on the table when she finished eating. It surprised me a little and I peered down.

"A-are you okay?"

Her face was bright red and her eyes bleary. That viper liquor was pretty strong. "Shir Noiirr, I feel so good right now!"

She couldn't even work her mouth effectively, so I knew it was my responsibility to see her home. I paid our tab and supported her on my shoulder as we walked out.

"I'm, like, totally fiiiine. I'm fine, okay. Okay? He he..."

"You don't look fine. I'm going to make sure you get home safe."

"Men are pigs, but you, Noir? If you tried to take advantage of me, Noiirrr, I'd consider myself lucky..."

"I feel like you've got a few wires crossed there."

"But I can't really do much, so I'm boring, right? Let's have some fun, Sir Noooir..." Luna caressed my neck and gazed up at me with passionate eyes. She was completely sauced. Normally, she was pretty restrained, but I guess this is what an absence of inhibitions did to her.

Luna's home was in a corner of the main residential area. It was fairly large for one person. I was less envious of her accommodations and more in awe of how much work it must take to keep clean. ...Maybe there was something wrong with me for thinking that way.

I carried her all the way through her door and into her bedroom. Once I hauled her up into bed and tried to leave, she grabbed my hand and wouldn't let go. "Be gentle please," she slurred.

"You might be drunk, but this is getting ridiculous! Please, just lay down."

When I tried to pull a blanket over her so she wouldn't catch a cold, she suddenly grabbed my arm and yanked so I fell onto the bed. Before I could even protest, Luna climbed on top of me and pushed me flat.

Her long, beautiful hair spilled out from behind her neck. Her face was still red, but her eyes were serious.

"I don't normally do things like this," she said.

"I can imagine. It kinda...wrecks your image."

"I decided that tonight, I was gonna stick my neck out and finally shoot my shot. Lately...I've been thinking it might be nice to be with you."

"W-well, I certainly appreciate the thought. I think you're very pretty too."

"So, is that a yes?"

"Um, well, uh, that's kind of a separate issue..."

I didn't get any more words out before Luna's slowly approaching face closed in on mine. Her plump, shapely lips trembled, nervous.

My heart pounded, increasingly out of control. Ahh, her face was right in front of me. I reflexively closed my eyes.

Fwump! A small sound came from beside me. Yup, that's right, *beside* me.

"Luna?"

Apparently, it was the sound of Luna collapsing face-first into a pillow. She was still on top of me, but she wasn't moving.

"Um, you're kind of heavy..."

She didn't react, so I pushed myself up to check her face. She was already dead asleep.

"I guess she wore herself out before she could make her move..."

Even a cleric couldn't fight alcohol-induced drowsiness forever. I was relieved, but at the same time, a little disappointed. All the same, I tucked her into bed.

Her soft breathing was adorable even while she was dreaming.

"Good night," I murmured, and tiptoed out of her house.

Chapter 28:

Off to Treasure Mountain

AFTER THAT NIGHT, I worked my butt off every day to earn LP. Eating weird food was part of it, but Emma, Luna, Lola, Alice, Maria, and Ms. Elena all did their individual part to assist. Somehow, I made it to over 10,000 LP!

Thankfully, even after I picked up Courage, I still had a good 9,000 left. All that was left was to figure out where to Bestow that Dragon Killer skill. We only had five days left until the end of the exam, so we needed to make our move soon. If we couldn't get that dragon fang, we'd have to really get cracking on collecting other materials.

We had a day off the following day, so it was time to go dragon hunting. Emma, Luna, and I went to the guild early in the morning to pick up the request from Lola. All the past month, Emma and Luna had been hard at work gathering information while I collected LP. In the end, they found out some key details.

"I spoke to some adventurers who encountered the dragon on the mountain and successfully escaped. But before it did, they noticed it seemed vulnerable to lightning elemental attacks. And they said it must really hate humans or something, because it tried to kill them the moment it laid eyes on them!"

"I heard from one of my patients that the dragon is an earth-type. It has small wings and is relatively heavy for its size, so it rarely flies."

So, it was weak against lightning, hated humans, and mostly moved around on foot. That was all highly valuable strategic info. The first element to address was the lightning weakness. My only attack in that category was Lightning Strike. Honestly, it didn't feel potent enough to depend on. I was thinking about picking a more powerful spell when Emma changed my mind.

"Hey, could we maybe catch it in a trap?"

"Now there's an idea."

Right! We didn't just have to attack it. For example, I could Bestow a skill like

Electrify on a trap. Although, my master did tell me that Bestowing an electrical charge on most materials destroyed them rather quickly. I'd have to be careful in my choice there.

"If we run, it'll come after us..." I said, thinking aloud.

"It's pretty small for a dragon. Maybe we could use a pitfall?" said Emma.

"That is certainly an option," said Luna.

"You even have an Excavate skill, don't you, Noir?"

"Yup, leave the digging to me."

Everyone contributed ideas as we hammered out the details. Three heads really were better than one. We came up with some pretty ingenious plans, if I do say so myself, and soon we were settled on our tactical approach. All that was left was to figure out where to Bestow Dragon Killer.

"I could use it on a weapon, but regular old swords and daggers seem like the wrong choice against a dragon."

"Hm, I'm really not sure, to be honest..."

"When it comes to close-quarters combat, I believe most people would use long swords, spears, mallets or hatchets, barring some other more appropriate abilities."

I wasn't especially good with a sword, so I ultimately settled on a spear. We headed to a weapons shop to pick one up, and I bought one that seemed decent, so far as I could tell. My only hesitation was over whether to go with the C or B-Grade version of Dragon Killer.

"Should we have me attack with the spear while you two pelt it with magic and firearms?" I asked. "Or should we all have spears with Dragon Killer?"

If we went with the former option, I'd have one spear with the B-Grade variant for 5,000 LP, and with the latter I'd make us three copies of the C-Grade variant for a total of 6,000. There was also the additional cost for Bestowing the skills, and I needed to save some LP for setting up traps, as well as for any emergency situations I hadn't anticipated.

"We're going to attack it once we get it trapped in a pit, so spears are

perfect,” said Emma. “Personally, I’d pick all three of us attacking it with spears.”

“Yes,” Luna agreed. “We should pin it down as a group.”

That settled it. We bought three long-handled spears and I gave each one C-Grade Dragon Killer. The amount of LP it cost to Bestow the skill on each spear varied depending on the specific weapon, so it ended up costing me over 7,500 to Get Creative and Bestow the skill on all three.

With that, most of our preparations were complete.

“Let’s all work together tomorrow.”

“We’ll all have to do our best. By the way, are we using Tigerson to travel?”

“About that...he wanted to be my family’s chauffeur, I’m afraid.”

“Then I’ll have a carriage ready to go first thing in the morning,” said Luna.

“There are some particularly good drivers among my fellow healers.”

“Thanks.”

It sounded like we could leave our transportation to the clerics. I parted ways with my party members and ended up wandering the market. I was mostly looking for fruits and meats and the like when I just happened to overhear some men talking nearby.

“It’s some crazy stuff, man. I know it’s weird, but I think it awakened something inside me. Maybe I’m a closet masochist.”

The rambling man was talking about how he got surprisingly turned on when his girlfriend stepped on him and showered him with abuse. Huh. I couldn’t quite stop thinking about it...especially as, with only 1,500 LP left before the hunt, I was a little uneasy.

When I sat down on my bed that night, I had an idea. Before I even knew what had come over me, I found myself knocking on Alice’s door.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Do you have a minute?”

“Of course.”

I went in and carefully closed the door behind me. She looked at me quizzically and I had to steel myself before I asked her something completely preposterous. “Would you...step on me?”

“You want me to step on you...?”

“Yes. It’s not some weird fetish, I swear. I need it to get stronger.”

I wouldn’t have been surprised if she called me gross and sick in the head, but Alice just smiled. “Very well. I, Alice, am always ready to assist you.”

I lay down on the floor of her room. Alice was in her pajamas and I stared up at her long legs.

“Where do you want me to step on you?”

“Maybe start around my stomach?”

“Here I go.” She pressed her toes into my stomach. I had a feeling she was being far too gentle—no new LP to speak of—so I asked her not to hold back.

“Try my chest next.”

Oof. The pressure she put on my chest made it hard to breathe. Alice let up when she noticed.

“No, no, Alice, imagine I’m someone you despise.”

“O-okay.”

I was starting to breathe heavily, but when I checked, I still hadn’t gotten any LP. *Dammit!* I guess she was being too gentle.

“Do my face next!”

Alice squished my cheek with her foot. Now *that* hurt. But that was probably what I needed for it to work.

“Abuse me.”

“Brother dearest, I can’t do that.”

“You can, Alice. I know you can.”

“Have you no shame, making your little sister do something like this?”

“Gah!”

“You couldn’t ask anyone else, could you? This is our little secret. I can’t believe you’re enjoying your little sister stepping all over you...”

“Guh!”

She moved her heel to my forehead! “Any last words?”

“Why do your feet smell so wonderful, Alice? I don’t understand it.”

“That’s because I take good care of them every day!”

“How magnificent!”

I was sure it wouldn’t have worked if her feet hadn’t smelled so good. I was abundantly grateful for Alice’s careful attention to detail. In the end, I got what I needed: my LP was easily over 2,000 after that. Although, I wasn’t sure whether that was cause for celebration or despair...

The next morning, my party set out via carriage, though first I earned some additional LP by greeting my party members with hugs. By afternoon, we arrived at the foot of Treasure Mountain. We asked our driver to wait for us as we approached the soldiers guarding the entrance to the mountain paths. There were only two, but several others seemed to be resting in a nearby cabin.

“Who are you?” they asked.

“We want to enter the mountain.”

We presented our guild identification to prove we were qualified adventurers. They burst out laughing when we told them that we were there to hunt dragons.

“You might be in Odin, but you’re just Grade C, aren’t you? How old are you anyway? Very funny.”

“I think we have a pretty good shot at it.”

Something in our faces told the soldiers we were serious, and they changed their tune.

“Well, let me explain then. Even if you call for help, we may be unable to respond. Our first priority is to keep watch here. Also, you are not allowed to

take anything you find on the mountain with you. The only exception is any raw materials you obtain from slaying monsters. Lastly, you may only remain in this area until sunset.”

“We understand.”

“Good luck then.”

We nodded and set off up the mountain.

Chapter 29:

The Earth Dragon

TREASURE MOUNTAIN was part of a mountain range. While the tall trees blocked the worst of the sun, it was getting close to summer, so it was still pretty hot. I hadn't accounted for the sweltering heat.

Valuable fruits and medicinal plants grew all around us, but they were considered property of the royal family, so we couldn't pick any. I wondered whether I could get away with sneaking some into my Pocket Dimension, but the guards had hinted they had ways to prevent people from doing just such a thing, so thieving was more or less off the table. We didn't really have time to waste on that sort of thing anyway. Killing that dragon was going to take all the time and energy we had.

"Let's make sure we know where it is first," I said, then asked the Great Sage where the nearest dragon was.

<Approximately 665 yards north of where you stand.>

Yikes! It was a lot closer than I expected. Admittedly, that same dragon could just as easily be moving around, so there was no guarantee we'd come on it right away.

"Let's stop here for a bit. I want to check where it is in five minutes." I wanted to figure out if it was moving, and if so, how fast. So, after five minutes, I asked the Great Sage again.

<Approximately 665 yards north of where you stand.>

That was *probably* good news. If the dragon wasn't moving, it was likely eating, resting, or even sleeping. We set out again, secure in that knowledge.

"The three of us will stand out more easily if we go together. I'll go on alone to scout things out."

"Just be careful."

I moved quickly and quietly until I spotted the dragon. Its great body sprawled

at the entrance of a large cave, fast asleep. It was still unspeakably intimidating, even with its eyes closed.

It was about fifteen to twenty feet long, which I understood was small for a dragon. Its whole body was covered in rugged brown scales, and small spines ran from its head down its back—not the most mountable beast. And, just like the reports said, its wings were small. It didn't really look capable of flight.

That was enough for the outside. Next, I needed to examine the inside. I carefully inched close enough to use my Discerning Eye.

Name: Earth Dragon

Level: 28

Skills: Menace; Roar; Charge; Rock Breath; Lightning Weakness (Grade B)

Level 28 was a lot lower than I anticipated. It was a lucky turn for us, but I wasn't about to drop my guard. I mean, there was a big difference between a Level 1 monster and a Level 1 person. And if a Level 20 dragon went up against a Level 100 goblin, the dragon would instantaneously obliterate the latter.

What's more, this earth dragon had some potentially troublesome skills, Charge and Rock Breath. I investigated whether I could break the Rock Breath skill, but even my simplest idea would have cost 2,500 LP, so that was out.

I switched tactics and looked into making it even weaker against lightning. I'd need 1,200 LP to upgrade its Lightning Weakness from B-Grade to A-Grade. Bumping it all the way to S-Grade required about 7,000, so I settled for A-Grade. My Lightning Strike would be especially effective against it now, and any items we electrified would work wonders too.

I returned to my friends to tell them what I'd learned and then got started digging a big hole.

"You really are fast at digging holes, Noir."

"He could be a professional..."

The two of them seemed weirdly put off by my hole-digging skills. For my part, I was just glad my Excavate skill was getting some use. The hole was completed in about thirty minutes. After that, we stuck several swords in the bottom of the pit, pointy-side up to create our own personal sword hell. Honestly, they probably wouldn't cause that much damage, but it was a start.

Next, we covered the whole with a bunch of sheets we'd sewn together. We fixed the sheet-quilt in place with stones and pulled it tight before sprinkling it with dirt and rocks for camouflage.

"All right, that's everything. Now I'll go lure it out, so you two take care of it when it falls into the hole," I said.

"Got it! You can count on us!" said Emma.

"If the going gets too tough, run. Your life is more important than any dragon fang," said Luna.

"I'll be careful. Here goes."

Finally, I headed back to the dragon. I felt like I'd spent a lot of my day running back and forth, but as the decoy, I didn't have much choice.

The dragon was still asleep when I reached it, but even so, the breath whooshing out of its nose blew my hair back. I got within a few yards of its tail. There, I placed the meat I'd bought at the market yesterday on the ground as bait, and I wet it with sea water using Water Drop. Then, I hid out of sight and started chucking stones at the dragon's sleeping form, though I was careful not to use too much force.

Plonk plonk plonk plonk! Stone after stone bounced into its behind, but that dragon really didn't want to wake up. At last, just when I was getting tired of throwing, one of them did the trick.

"Grr?"

The dragon let out a little growl. Its attention was drawn toward its tail, and I darted out of sight when it turned in my direction. *That was close!*

I could hear its legs moving, then stop. I peered out from my hiding spot. The dragon loomed in front of the meat. It didn't even sniff, it just leaned right

down to gobble, so I quickly Bestowed Electrify on the meat. It normally would have cost 1,000 LP, but because I'd wet the meat with salt water, it was only half as much.

"Garh?!"

The dragon's massive body flipped over when it bit in. That electricity seemed almost too effective. After a few seconds, the dragon bellowed, rage filling its face. The sound was mind-blowing. Even with Hearing Protection, it made my ears ache to the point that I stumbled into view, accidentally revealing myself.

The dragon's eyes met mine. It roared again. I froze. Augh, hadn't I learned Courage?! I was standing still in my tracks as it charged at immense speed. If that thing hit me, I'd be pulverized!

"Move! Move, you idiot!"

I finally broke through my fright and desperately dove out of the way. The dragon missed me by inches and barreled into several trees, knocking them down. *I don't want to do this anymore. That thing is terrifying...!*

The dragon's powerful body turned around and came for me again. I prepared to sprint, but there was one problem: there was a dragon between me and the pitfall.

"Grrrrr!"

It seemed to have gotten its anger in check. This time, it closed the distance between us slowly. It absolutely intended to kill me, *that* was coming through loud and clear.

"Sorry, but I have no intention of taking you on one-on-one."

When I was in trouble, Blinding Flash was my ace in the hole. I set off a flash of distracting light and slipped past the dragon. The light kept it busy long enough for me to put some much needed distance between us.

But wait! I looked over my shoulder, and a chill went down my spine. The earth dragon was watching me from a distance, its mouth open wide.

"Is it going to use its breath?"

My answer came in the form of a horizontal cascade of rocks hurtling in my

direction, ferried by the gale of the dragon's breath. The smallest was the size of my head, and the larger ones? Didn't matter. My bones were going to be fine dust if any part of that attack hit me. I narrowly avoided that fate with a desperate snake maneuver.

"Come after me! I'm getting away!" I shouted as I zig-zagged away.

The dragon took the bait and started to give chase, and I did a little fist pump to celebrate. That said, I was still in deep trouble. The dragon was a lot faster than me, for one. But just as I could feel its breath against my back, my salvation—the sheet-covered pit—came into view. I didn't see Luna or Emma anywhere, but I didn't have time to look for them.

"Hup!"

I leapt through the air. The dragon stretched out its neck to try and catch me, but it didn't quite reach.

"Gaaaaaaaarh?!"

In one fatal step, the dragon toppled into the trap and fell into our sword hell. My landing wasn't the smoothest, but I tumbled forward on the ground, rolling to absorb my momentum.

A shadow passed overhead. Someone shouted bravely as they flew above me. Luna's spear pierced the dragon's upper jaw as it struggled.

"Don't forget about me!"

Emma dashed out of her hiding spot and stabbed the dragon's lower jaw with her spear. The dragon's face twisted, pinned from above and below. That Dragon Killer skill was really pulling its weight.

"Haa haa..."

I didn't have time to think. I grabbed my spear and followed my party into the fray. The dragon was weakened, so this was my chance. I lunged with all my might, sinking the tip of my spear into the dragon's throat. It knocked me away with its tail, but I got up with only a few cuts and scrapes. The dragon, on the other hand, seemed to be mortally wounded. It stopped moving.

As it did, my level shot up past 100 and I felt my chest fill with joy. Luna spun

her gun to heal my minor wounds with a Healing Shot while Emma rushed over to stroke my back.

“Can you believe it wasn’t even Level 30?” I panted. “Dragons are terrifying.”

“But we won! We did it!” Emma cried.

“Heh, the bonds of friendship reign victorious... O-or something like that...” Luna got embarrassed about halfway through, but, well, I thought she was pretty cute.

“We should have a party to celebrate,” I said. I held out my hand and Emma and Luna placed theirs on top. I worried I was getting a little carried away, but it seemed like the right thing to do to celebrate a victory.

After that, we moved on to disassembling the carcass. The first thing we focused on were the fangs, since we needed those for the exam.

“It’s so hard!” Emma was surprised by the fact that her dagger wouldn’t cut the dragon’s flesh. I guess regular weapons just wouldn’t do. It turned out to be much easier to use the spears with the Dragon Killer skill.

Finally, at long last, we got our hands on the fangs we had come for. I had a feeling the other leftover parts would be useful too, and Luna seemed to agree.

“Hrm, it feels like such a waste to just leave the rest,” she said. “Dragon parts fetch a high price. They’re useful for making all manner of items.”

“I hear the meat is delicious too,” said Emma.

“Your Pocket Dimension was C-Grade, wasn’t it, Sir Noir? It’d probably be hard to fit the whole thing in there...”

Well...it *might* work. The dragon wasn’t so big. I gave it a shot, and to my surprise, the dragon carcass vanished.

“Whoa! Amazing!”

“Ha, let’s go brag to those guards.”

We jaunted back down the mountain, full of cheer. When we reached the bottom, the guards were all amused. They asked us about how our hunt went, and we told them we’d bagged ourselves the dragon.

“Ah ha ha, you really shouldn’t lie about things like that. But I’m glad you made it back safe. I hate it when young people die, especially when they’re as pretty as these two lovely ladies.”

So I take it you wouldn’t be very sad if I died, huh?

“We should get going, we need to let the guild know we completed the request,” I said.

“How’s that ‘fake it ’til you make it’ thing going for you?”

“Good question. How’s this for an answer?” I whipped the earth dragon’s corpse out of my Pocket Dimension and the guards’ expressions did a complete one-eighty.

“Wha?! Y-y-y-you really did it?!”

“You best believe your eyes.”

After they had a poke at the dragon carcass to confirm that it was really real, really a dragon, and really dead, the guards stood to attention. “We salute you, great adventurers. And we look forward to hearing of your future endeavors.”

“And we hope that you guys will learn not to judge a book by its cover,” I said.

“Ngh, well, I can’t really argue with that...”

At long last, we got into our carriage and headed back to town. As we ran into a couple monsters on the way, we didn’t get back until after sundown. Nevertheless, Odin’s guild hall was still open, so we made sure to make our report. Lola was waiting for us, even though her shift was over.

“First of all, I’m just glad you’re all safe. What did you do with the dragon?”

“One sec, clear out, lemme borrow this space for a second.”

I once more presented the dragon carcass, this time in front of the reception counter. Silence fell over the guild hall. Then all the other adventurers started to cheer and Lola’s eyes glistened.

“Oh my goodness, I knew you could do it, Mr. Noir!”

“Wow! Is that thing real? Where’d you hunt it?”

“You guys have really been on a roll!”

It was already well into the evening, but the guild was full of noise. Everyone was having fun, even without alcohol. Most importantly, the three of us got to enjoy our victory in good company. The whole guild listened intently to our tale of clever heroism, and ultimately, we ended up celebrating until late into the night.

Chapter 30:

Hard Work Pays off in the End

I HAD A FEW precious days of peace after that. I continued taking requests to ensure Lola beat Sarah, but I stuck with less risky ones. On the exam side, we decided to present the dragon fang at the last minute, mostly because I wanted to see the look on Ms. Elena's face.

Finally, the last day of the exam period arrived. After morning greetings were over, Ms. Elena began. "This is your last chance, kids. Come to the front of the room and present your items when your name is called. You'll be scored on the spot."

She reviewed the scoring criteria: red lizardman tails were worth 3,500 points, unicorn horns were worth 50,000 points, and dragon fangs were worth 300,000 points. Our class was the cream of the crop, so no one scored less than 5,000. Most people had between 10,000 and 30,000. A few broke 50,000—like Maria and her attendant, Amane.

"Ha, you got a unicorn horn... Excellent work," said Ms. Elena.

"They were very difficult to find, so we were only able to retrieve the one."

"That's plenty. With the twenty lizardman tails you collected earlier, that's 120,000 total. Split between the two of you, that's 60,000 each."

Our classmates were all abuzz.

"That's Lady Maria for you!"

"Those two might take the top spot."

"But I guess even those two didn't make it to the 100,000 needed to get out of summer school."

As the excitement built, Ms. Elena glared at Emma and I. "Now it's your turn."

I understood why she looked so displeased. We hadn't turned in a single thing so far.

"Should I even bother getting my hopes up? Did you think this was going to be

a cakewalk and then end up in hot water? If that's what happened, I see I sorely misjudged you."

"Heh, I think it's a little early to be jumping to conclusions, Ms. Elena."

"Yeah. Come on, Noir, show her."

"Please accept these," I said, and I presented the dragon fangs.

"Fangs..." Ms. Elena's eyes widened. "Those are earth dragon fangs, aren't they?"

"Sure are."

"I-I can't believe you actually did it. I'm impressed. Honestly."

"So two fangs should be 600,000, that's 300,000 each, right?"

"Yes, congratulations. You two are completely excused from summer school."

"Yay!"

Emma and I high-fived.

"Now why don't you use first period to tell us all about how you defeated that dragon? You have valuable experience to share."

And so, we regaled the class with the tale of our dragon hunt. Of course, I glossed over my abilities as best as I could.

On the way home, Emma was in a great mood. "Now we can have tons of fun during vacation!"

"You said it. I'm glad we got out of summer school. Maybe we should go on a trip somewhere?"

"I like that idea. Hey, Noir, let's spend lots of time together, okay?"

"As long as we're still doing our jobs as adventurers, sure."

"Eh he he, I wonder what we should do. The sky's the limit!"

Just making plans for the summer with Emma was fun in itself. I actually had money this year too. The prospect of going on a food tour was particularly appealing.

A few days after the exam, another meaningful event was upon us. We

gathered in the guild hall, anxiously awaiting the receptionist scores. Lola couldn't sit still, and I clapped her on the shoulder. "You worked really hard. And your adventurers worked really hard too."

"I did everything I could, but Sarah is a formidable enemy..."

As if summoned by her name, Sarah approached. She had a queenly bearing. "Good job, you worked really hard, Lola."

"Don't patronize me."

"Do you remember our deal if I win?"

"Mr. Noir...will switch receptionists."

"I'm so glad we understand each other. Hello, Mr. Noir."

"H-hi." I just couldn't get used to her. With her skimpy outfit, I had a hard time figuring out where to look. And she was standing so close to me.

"When I become your manager, I promise I'll support you to my utmost."

"Hey, you haven't won yet."

"Oh, the scores are here!"

Another member of the staff was posting the month's scores on the wall. It was a bar graph, but two of the bars clearly stood out from the rest. They belonged to the two receptionists currently embroiled in a heated battle. From a distance, they looked about even, but upon closer inspection, Lola's bar was clearly longer.

"No way...I-I won?" Lola seemed to have the hardest time believing it. She had been working hard all month from early morning to late night. It was a miracle—no, it was proof that hard work does pay off.

"You cheated," Sarah said in a calm tone. She glared at Lola and repeated herself. "You clearly cheated. I can't imagine how else you did it."

"Give me a break. Where's your proof?"

"Proof? I'm sure there's something..."

"You don't have any, do you? You shouldn't call people cheaters when you don't have evidence. That's no better than calling someone a criminal. Only

lunatics do that.”

“H-how...?”

“Anyway. I won, so don’t you dare try stealing my adventurers again.
Especially Mr. Noir.”

“You don’t have to be so mean about it...”

When the reality of her loss finally hit her, Sarah crouched down and started crying. Lola, meanwhile, looked triumphant. I couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for Sarah.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” I said. “Second place is still impressive.”

“I knew you’d understand, Mr. Noir. Take this. I want to get to know you, not as receptionist and adventurer, but as two regular people!” Sarah handed me a slip of paper with something written on it. Had she had it on her the whole time?

“Why you liiiiittle! Knock it off!”

“Eeeeeeeek! The evil receptionist is trying to kill me!”

Lola was furious, and Sarah ran away. I was still bewildered. The slip of paper hadn’t been a coupon, but her address. The other adventurers just watched, chuckling to themselves.

Another peaceful day at Odin!

Extra Chapter: From Hell to Heaven

THE DAYS were growing hotter, and summer would soon be upon us. The temperature made it increasingly hard to sleep, so I wasn't surprised when I woke up suddenly, but for some reason I also found my throat hurt. My mind was foggy, and my nose was running. Only then did it occur to me what might have befallen me.

"Good morning, brother dearest—brother?!" Alice's expression changed dramatically when she looked me in the eye.

"Why are you so surprised?"

"You look so pale. Are you feeling poorly?" Unsurprisingly, having spent most of our lives together, I couldn't fool Alice.

"Ugh, yeah, I think I caught a cold. But I'm fine. I'm not even sick enough to stay home from school."

However, when I tried to get out of bed, I stumbled and almost fell over. I only avoided kissing the floor because Alice caught me. It was a bit humiliating.

"You mustn't push yourself. You need rest today. Emma can let the school know."

"But—"

"You've been running yourself ragged! One day of rest will do you no harm. Okay?" Alice cajoled me to go back to bed. She was probably right. I had been going at it pretty hard, and my forehead did feel hot.

"Leave everything to me." She flashed me a cute little wink and left the room. She might have been younger than me, but she was a lot more responsible.

I relaxed, closed my eyes, and fell into a deep sleep. Did I fall asleep so quickly because I hadn't been getting enough rest lately, or because of the physical exhaustion? I couldn't be sure.

One thing I *was* sure of was that the fever was responsible for some truly horrible dreams. I found myself in a hellish place where demons kept

submerging me in magma. My body screamed, but mysteriously my forehead remained cool. Now how did that work?

I woke up feeling perplexed, and I found Alice had placed a cool towel on my forehead.

“Thanks...”

“You were thrashing in your sleep. I was so worried for you...”

“Oof, just a nightmare. But I don’t feel any worse than I did this morning.” I sat up and realized my back was drenched in sweat. Whew boy. Wait a minute—I peered at Alice. “Shouldn’t you be at school?”

“I went, but I was so worried that I jumped out a window in the middle of class and came home.”

“You what?!”

How could I not worry after hearing that? But she seemed to be waiting for me to praise her for it. I guess I was impressed by her spunk, but I was afraid if I encouraged her, she’d do it again. What ultimately broke the uncomfortable silence was Tigerson’s voice from the first floor.

<Alice, how is Noir doing? I worry for him.> Our staircase was too narrow for Tigerson to come up.

“His fever has come down quite a bit. Brother dearest, I’m going to fetch your dinner. It’s already evening.”

“What, really?”

I’d slept almost all day. I got changed while Alice was getting my dinner. When I decided to poke my head downstairs to say hi to Tigerson, I noticed things sounded a little crazy down there.

<Pardon! Noir is ill. You must not make too much noise.> “I know! That’s why I want to check on him!” That voice was instantly familiar. It was Emma.

“Of course. But a large crowd will only cause more trouble, so I’ll visit him in your stead.”

“Like I’d just accept that. I predict that you’ll just unnecessarily tire Sir Noir

out.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You think I’m going to do something weird?”

“I can see the look in your eyes.”

It sounded like Lola and Luna were with her, and Lola was getting impatient.

“Agh! Where do you get off trying to get a leg up on the rest of us?”

“I’ve nursed Noir more times than I can count since we were kids. It’s only natural that I do it now.”

By the sound of it, Emma slipped past and the others gave chase. I could hear their footsteps scampering toward my room. They all paused in front of my door, so it seemed like they had some sense left in them. They broke into hushed whispers.

“Even if he’s asleep, you’re not allowed to kiss him.”

“I wouldn’t do that. If anyone would, it’s you.”

“Hmph. Anyway, no funny business. And keep it down.”

The door knob turned quietly and I smiled when they peered in.

“If you were talking about me, I’m up.”

“Ah! Oh no, you were awake?!”

“I’m feeling a lot better. I only got up to get changed.”

“Rats...” Lola snapped her fingers, disappointed. I guess she was hoping to catch me while I was changing.

“At any rate, Sir Noir, you still need rest. Your fever may return, so you ought to return to bed. Allow me to assist.”

“L-Luna?!”

Luna scooped me up into her arms, giggling. She carried me to my bed like some kind of princess. Lola followed up by tucking me in with a blanket and Emma put a cool, moist towel on my forehead. I wanted for nothing, and the three of them insisted that I sleep. But how could I, under the circumstances? I mean, there were three people staring right at me.

“Um, I’m actually not very tired right now.”

“But you should try to sleep anyway,” said Emma. “People heal fastest when they’re sleeping, you know. Ms. Elena taught us that the best cure for a cold isn’t magic or medicine, but rest.”

“Mr. Noir, please close your eyes. I’ll be quiet,” said Lola.

“As will I,” said Luna.

I didn’t have much choice, so I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. My efforts were in vain. I wasn’t tired at all. That wasn’t surprising, seeing as I’d slept all day. But the three of them seemed to get the wrong idea.

“He’s already asleep.”

“He really was exhausted.”

“You two can go home now. I’ll look after Mr. Noir, so—”

Lola suddenly stopped talking mid-sentence, and I felt something touch my lips—something warm and soft. From the faint sensation of breath and the fragrance of her hair, I could tell it was Emma who’d kissed me.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?”

“Aha! I just remembered that I didn’t greet Noir today. It’s for the LP, okay?”

Ohhh, that made sense. I appreciated her efforts, even if it was a little surprising.

“Then I’ll do it too!”

“Oh no, no, any more and you’ll wake him up.”

“Oh really? I see how it is,” Lola pouted, but the next instant I felt someone get into bed with me! It was obviously Lola. I still had my eyes closed, but I could feel her hugging me.

“You stupid receptionist! Where do you get off?!”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. They say that you recover from a cold when you give it to someone else, so I’m just getting close to Mr. Noir to try to catch his cold for him. I have no ulterior motive.”

“Ugh, then what if I do it too?!” said Emma.

Somehow Luna managed to jump over Emma and install herself on the empty side of my bed. “Two should be better than one. Sir Noir is always doing so much for me, the least I can do is catch his cold.”

Luna gave me a squeeze. She wasn’t about to let Lola have a leg up. I never knew how popular it was to catch a cold.

“That’s my spot!”

“Heh, too bad.”

“I-I’m not giving up. My rightful place is by Noir’s side.” Emma wasn’t about to force her way in, was she?! I felt something creep up from my feet. I guess technically my front was “open” since I was laying on my back...

“He he he, get better soon, Noir.”

They enveloped me in their supple limbs. *I could get used to this.* Honestly, their skin felt so nice against mine that I felt like I might pass out for real. They all smelled so good, it was making me dizzy. I couldn’t take much more.

“Uh, um, uhh, you guys are too hot...you’ll raise my temperature again...”

All three of them let out a little gasp. They finally realized I was awake. But I was an idiot to think it was over—they all came up with excuses and clung to me for another ten minutes.

My whole body felt like it was on fire, but I couldn’t do much about it. I did get a lot of LP out of the episode, so I was grateful for that, but it did ultimately end up bringing my fever back.

It didn’t feel that bad, though. If anything, my baser instincts were probably shouting to *heat things up* even more, but...I was satisfied.



Extra Chapter: Arranged Marriage

ONE WEEKEND AFTERNOON, I was loitering around town when I happened to spot Ms. Elena. I had to wonder what she was up to. I could tell from a distance that she was unusually doom and gloom about something. Curiosity got the better of me, so I approached her to say hello, but when she turned around she really did look like she might drop dead any second.

“Oh, it’s you, Noir...”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost. What’s wrong?”

“Kind of rude to the ghost, there. But I guess I really do look bad, huh?”

“Are you headed somewhere you don’t want to go?”

“You’re a sharp one. I’m going somewhere extremely important. Think of it like a training ground for adults. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Why you gotta be so prickly? Just tell me where you’re going.”

Ms. Elena stared at the ground with hollow eyes. She sighed, and responded in a serious tone. “When I was a mercenary, there was a person who always had my back, and I’m going to meet someone they want to set me up with, for an arranged marriage.”

“An a-arranged marriage?!”

It really was surprising to hear. Arranged marriages were typically something only high-status noble families did, but I was pretty sure Ms. Elena was of common birth.

“Out of concern for me, my friend set me up with an upper-class guy.”

Well, that made sense. Ms. Elena was beautiful and capable; she wouldn’t be out of place among nobility. But for some reason, she was extremely depressed.

“Do you have a boyfriend or something, Ms. Elena?”

“For your information, I do not.”

“D-don’t be mad at me. So, it’s not that you’re already in love with someone

else?”

“No, that’s not it. I just...don’t have any interest in marriage. So why would I want to get married to someone I don’t even like? But I owe my friend so much, I can’t turn down the invitation to meet the guy.” Ms. Elena looked really concerned as she raked her hands through her hair. I’d never seen her so shaken up.

I wanted to help. “Is there anything I can do?”

“That’s just what I wanted to hear!”

Oh no. I had sealed my fate.

Ms. Elena grabbed my shoulders with a sparkle in her eye. “Will you be my boyfriend for the day?”

“I-I think that might be a bit too much of a stretch?”

“Oh. Well, of course. I wasn’t even being serious...”



I didn't think I stood much of a chance of passing for a twenty-something. And even if I could, student-teacher romance wasn't exactly socially acceptable.

Ms. Elena sighed. "I just know I won't be able to advocate for myself, and I'll just go along with it and end up married... I wish you were ten years older."

I was suddenly struck with an idea. I might be able to make a skill that could help. I considered doing something to age myself. I could always use Editor to disable the effect once I was done. Of course, it would cost LP.

First I did a little research. Skills to lower one's age were ridiculously expensive, but you could add on some years pretty cheaply. It made sense—in more simplistic terms, it was just aging. Adding ten years would only cost me 300 LP.

"I might just be able to grant that wish, Ms. Elena."

"What are you talking about?"

"I might be able to physically transform myself—temporarily. But only on the condition that you don't ask any questions and you agree to help me out."

"O-okay. I accept your terms!"

"Okay, let's find an alley or something."

"Oh, *that*, huh? *That's* the kind of help you need?"

"Exactly, he he he."

"Well, I guess we don't have any other choice, he he."

Ms. Elena and I had developed a mutually beneficial relationship, but it wasn't something we could flaunt in the middle of a busy street. We headed off the main road to somewhere more secluded.

When we found a spot shrouded in shadow, I lay down face up on the ground and told Ms. Elena to do her worst. She nodded enthusiastically and sat down on my stomach, then repeated the action over and over.

"This is a pretty good ab workout," she said.

"Hngh hngh hngh, I'll be ripped in no time," I said.

“You know it. I’m moving to your chest next.”

“W-wow, there’s so much pressure...”

“I probably shouldn’t tell a student about this, but back when I was a mercenary, I received hundreds of compliments on my pert ass.” She had a far-off look in her eyes as she gazed up at the sky.

I could understand why so many people praised her taut, muscular body, but my “weight training” was getting a little rough.

“Just a little more, Noir. We’re doing your cheeks last.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I turned my face to the side and she ground her ass into my cheek. I absolutely did not want any passersby to see that, but...it did get me a lot of LP.

Once we were done, we were both sweating. I felt kind of refreshed, like I’d just finished a workout.

“Is that all you needed?”

“Yup. Now I’m going to transform myself.” I made myself the age-up skill. I could hear my bones growing as my shape changed. I got taller, and my shoulders got broader. My arms and legs thickened a bit too. I felt a little muscle pain, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t endure. All in all, I was impressed at how much my body had changed.

Meanwhile, Ms. Elena’s jaw was on the floor. But how could I blame her? I had aged ten years before her eyes. “Noir, is that really you?”

“In the flesh. My body is in its mid-twenties now.” Wow, even my voice had gotten deeper.

“Y-you’re actually pretty handsome. And you’re taller than me now.”

“I dunno if I believe you, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

I wanted to get a better look at my face, but we were short on time. Just to be sure, I checked that I could undo the aging skill with Editor. It wasn’t going to be a problem at all with the LP I had. That was a relief.

“We spent too much time training,” she said. “We need to get going.”

“So, should I just pretend to be your boyfriend?”

“I said I didn’t have one before, so let’s go with the story that we met yesterday and it was love at first sight. Play along.”

“I’ll do my best.”

We hurried to the restaurant where they were supposed to meet.

Ms. Elena’s friend was waiting at the finest restaurant in town along with the person she was being set up with. Most of the customers were nobles, so even a cup of tea was expensive. They turned away any shabby-looking common folk at the door.

Somehow, we got past the strict eye of the host and went inside. The oak furniture seemed profoundly expensive and everyone looked wealthy. We found the people we were looking for at the back.

“Hey! Over here, Elena.” The person who waved at her was a middle-aged man with white hair. He had a gentle face, but his skin was covered in thin scars from a long history of combat. He had an imposing aura, just like Ms. Elena’s.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Hazlo.”

“Heh, no trouble. This is the person I was telling you about, Amoir.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Elena! I’m the eldest son of the Elliot Viscounty, Amoir.”

Amoir had a gentlemanly air. He looked to be in his mid-twenties and was quite handsome. His brown hair was as shiny as a girl’s, and his teeth were sparkling white. I did wonder what the red rose in his breast pocket was all about. Ms. Elena seemed a little put off by it.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Elena, and I’m currently working as an instructor at the Hero Academy.”

“Look, we can chat all we want while we drink some tea. By the way, Elena, who is this young fellow?”

“Oh, let me explain.”

We took a seat across from them.

“My name is Noir and I work at a restaurant.” I’d decided to conceal my connection to the Stardia family. We didn’t have any adult children in the house, so I figured lying was the best option.

“Are you of noble birth or a commoner?”

“Common as common can be.”

“I see, then do take this opportunity to enjoy the tea here. I’m sure you rarely have the chance to come to a place like this.”

I couldn’t tell if Amoir was trying to be nice or belittle me.

“As I am also a commoner,” said Ms. Elena. “I’m looking forward to tasting the tea here too.”

“Oh, you may be a commoner, but you’re special, Elena!” said Amoir. “You want to hear something funny? I actually happened to see you once, when you were still a mercenary. You were so beautiful, your eyes so piercing and unwavering, and you had such a regal bearing. One look and I was a total goner. I begged Mr. Hazlo to set this up.” It didn’t sound like a lie. He was so excited that his face was as red as the flower in his pocket.

Ms. Elena, on the other hand, just looked embarrassed. “Umm, so I appreciate the interest, but I can’t return your feelings. You see, Noir here is my boyfriend...”

“Oh no!”

“What? I thought you said you weren’t seeing anyone?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Hazlo, but it happened so fast. We only met yesterday. I’m a little embarrassed to admit, but I fell head over heels the moment I laid eyes on him.”

Said out loud, it was pretty out there. Ms. Elena jabbed me under the table.

Yes, I get it, I’ll play along. I nodded. “It was the same for me, I’m afraid. I just knew we were soulmates—that I was put on this earth to meet her.”

Elena subtly raised her eyebrows at me.

Don't give me that look! I know I went a little overboard.

But the other two seemed to buy my little act. Mr. Hazlo even looked up at the ceiling, troubled. "Well, I'm at a bit of a loss. I'm so sorry, Amoir..."

"It's not your fault. These things happen. I guess we can chalk it up to fate." Amoir's shoulders drooped and he gazed mournfully at his tea. I felt bad for him, but I was doing this all for Ms. Elena, and her needs came first. The atmosphere had grown heavy, so we looked for the first opportunity to escape. Though the tea was delicious, ultimately I only got a few sips...

As we left the restaurant, Ms. Elena's expression finally relaxed. "Ah! What a weight off my shoulders!"

"I felt kind of bad for Amoir, though. Are you sure you shouldn't have given him a chance?"

"No, he's not at all my type. He's probably a total snake underneath that gentlemanly facade."

"You really think so?"

"He was glaring at you the whole time. I could tell he was struggling to choke back his anger."

Honestly, I did get that feeling. But if I'd been in his position, I'd probably have felt similarly.

"Anyway, I owe you for that. Is there anything you want?"

"Oh, I don't need anything. I should be going."

"What? You're leaving already?"

I was totally thinking about showing off my twenty-something body to Emma and my family. Would they even notice? Probably, right?

After I said goodbye to Ms. Elena, I was headed off to find one of them when something grabbed my shoulder. I should have guessed who I'd find when I turned.

"Amoir?"

"Hey, I just wanna talk. You got a second?"

“Uh, what?”

What could he want? I followed Amoir into a narrow side street and, when he was sure no one was around, he suddenly shoved a bag of money at me.

“Would you accept this to break up with Elena? I’m desperately in love with her. I just have to make her mine.”

I was so shocked, I was at a total loss for words.

Seeing my befuddlement, he pressed. “If it’s not enough, I can give you more. But let’s keep this between us, okay?”

“Um, I don’t know how I feel about taking a bribe to break up with her.”

“You can’t even begin to understand what an astounding creature she is. You couldn’t make her happy. I’m far better suited.”

“She doesn’t think you’re her type.”

“Oh, really? Hmph. I guess this would be faster after all.”

Fwump! His fist flew right toward my face! I dodged instinctively. That would’ve hurt if it’d connected. I opened some distance between us with a practiced back step. At that, Amoir looked surprised.

“You’re no ordinary waiter, are you?”

“I don’t approve of the way you conduct yourself,” I said.

“Shut up. I’m not going to miss next time.”

I used Discerning Eye—Amoir was much weaker than either Ms. Elena or Mr. Hazlo. The only thing he had over any ordinary person was C-Grade Martial Arts. His confidence wasn’t entirely misplaced. But, unfortunately for him, he was a step or two below most of the other people I’d fought.

I started by firing off a Lightning Strike when he tried to kick me.

“What?! That’s dangerous!”

I was impressed that he managed to dodge, but he was wide open when he landed. His stance was all off too. I took one step toward him and smashed my fist into his diaphragm.

“Gah!”

His tongue flopped out as he fell over. That ended that. But just to be safe, I didn't drop my guard.

"I-I'm the son of a viscount. You're not gonna get away with this..."

"Talk about lame." Ms. Elena made her entrance with spectacular timing. Had she been watching the whole time? Her eyes were cold as ice. "You couldn't buy him off *and* you couldn't beat him in a fight, even with the advantage of surprise. You're zero for zero here. And yet, even when faced with overwhelming proof of the difference in your abilities, you refuse to admit defeat and brandish your family's status like that means anything—minus 100 points for that. If you were one of my students, I'd fail you."

"E-Elena... Why are you...?"

"I had a feeling you might try to do something to Noir, so I followed you. And now your amateur hour has put me in a bad mood."

"I could make you so much happier than some guy you just met!"

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, I only just met you too. At any rate, not only am I not interested in you, I'm so repulsed that I never want to see your ugly mug again. If you're after a fight, come at me directly next time. Bye." Ms. Elena clapped, commanding him to begone.

Amoir couldn't defy her.

"You carried yourself well," she told me. "That surprise attack didn't even ruffle you."

"I have your brutal training to thank for that."

"Don't compare me to a scoundrel like him. But I have to admit, I have caused you a lot of trouble."

I insisted that I didn't mind, but that didn't satisfy her. She locked arms with me and said she'd treat me to a meal. "I'll be your girlfriend, just for today."

"Oh, uh, I don't really—"

"What was that?"

"N-nothing. I would love a delicious meal."

“Good.”

Heck, I didn't have any reason to turn it down, especially if it was going to make her feel better after this crappy day. Though on our way to her favorite restaurant, I heard her whisper to herself. “Hrm, if only you'd been born five or ten years earlier...”

“Does that mean the twenty-six-year-old me is your type?”

“Don't get ahead of yourself.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I let myself be dragged along, just like a frog being stared down by a snake. Whoever Ms. Elena ended up marrying, he sure had a big job ahead of him.

Extra Chapter: A Strange Holiday

I HAD NEVER BEEN off the continent, so I couldn't even imagine what the cultures and customs of far-off kingdoms were like. Despite that, there were times when I felt my home region—well, really more like home kingdom—was pretty odd. One of those times was on holidays.

We had a cosmic heck-ton of holidays. I didn't even know the point of most of them. Consider, for example: Barefoot Day, which involved walking barefoot; Meat Day, where one ate meat at every meal; and Sarcasm Day, when we said something sarcastic to everyone we met all day. They were all pretty weird, but this day was the weirdest of all—Kissing Day!

As you might expect, it was a day where you were supposed to give kisses to people as a thank you. It was hard not to be preoccupied with the topic. I mean, when I sat down to breakfast, my father was kissing all sorts of things.

“Good morning, table. Thank you for all your hard work, chair.”

I vainly pretended not to see my father kissing everything in sight. I didn't want to risk making eye contact with him.

“Hey, Noir, I'm not doing anything weird.”

Nevertheless, he seemed intent on dragging me into his nonsense.

“Kisses are supposed to be a way to express thanks...right?” I said.

“Exactly,” he said. “Long ago, there was a tyrannical ruler who stole everything from his people, even the hair off their backs. He was extremely paranoid, so he was terribly cold and distant with everyone in the land. The one thing that melted his icy heart was a woman who was an extremely good kisser. He fell madly in love with her, and her love made him warm to other people.”

That was the origin of the holiday. It was popular enough with couples, but was there really any point? And today wasn't just about kisses, there was another event that got everyone needlessly worked up.

“I just know you're going to find the smile bird today, dear.”

“I’m sure you will too, honey. You even took the day off work.”

“Are you going to look for it too, brother dearest?”

“Umm, well, I tried last year, but I didn’t find it.”

Once a year, on Kissing Day, the blue bird of happiness visited the kingdom. It was always on the same day. Even our greatest scholars couldn’t explain why. The bird was technically a monster, but it didn’t harm humans, and when you approached it, it made you smile. That was probably why people started calling it the smile bird.

I went looking for it with Emma the previous year, but it didn’t stay in town for long. We didn’t even catch a glimpse of its shadow...

“Ah, I better get going.”

It was time for school, so I headed off to meet Emma. I called out when I spotted her on the street.

“Morning.”

“Good morning! The weather’s so nice today.”

“You seem cheerier than usual, Emma.”

“He he he, you’re so forgetful, Noir. The smile bird is coming today.”

“You wanna look for it again this year?”

“Of course I do! But before we do that...” Emma wrapped her arms around me and gave me a kiss. She did it for me every day to help me earn LP, but it seemed a little different today. For starters, she kissed my cheeks and my forehead, then my neck and my hands.

“Hey, Emma, this is a little embarrassing in the middle of the street...”

“There’s nothing weird about it today. See?”

She did have a point. Everyone on the street was kissing indiscriminately. We headed to school, surrounded by all that kissing. Class was the same as usual, but lunch was a little different. Maria, the duke’s daughter, and her attendant Amane, said they wanted to talk, so I followed them up to the roof.

No one else was up there, and I could feel the wind directly against my skin.

Their skirts fluttered in the breeze and looked like they could flip up at any moment. The thought made my heart pound—not for any perverse reason, but because it'd be awkward.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” I asked.

“Mr. Noir,” said Maria. “Do you know what day it is today?”

“You mean the holiday?”

“Indeed. Because you lifted my curse, I owe you a debt of gratitude and I would appreciate it if you would allow me to...k-kiss you.”

“I...have the same request as Maria,” said Amane. “Though only if you are willing, Mr. Stardia.”

They both seemed serious, and of course I was willing. Plus, it'd earn me some LP. I nodded, and they stood on either side of me.

“Amane, are you ready?”

“No issues here, Maria.”

“On three, then—”

They both kissed me on the cheek at the same time. For a long time. Then they moved around in front of me and kissed me on the mouth, one after the other. I froze. I could see a faint blush on Maria's cheeks. I thought Amane's face looked pretty much the same as ever until I noticed how red her ears were.

“I hope we will continue to be good friends.”

“R-right back at you.”

Maybe this wasn't such a bad holiday after all.

After class, I met up with Luna and Lola at the guild hall. I'm sure it won't shock you to hear that when I met them, they jumped on the opportunity the holiday presented. Surprise attacks that restore your vitality sure are nice!

“By the way, Mr. Noir,” Lola asked. “Were you planning to take a request today?”

“Yeah, but I was talking to Emma about looking for the smile bird.”

“Is that so... I’ll join you, then.”

“Huh? What about work?”

“It’s fine. I had a feeling you’d be doing that, so I got permission to leave.”

Lola was determined to join us in the search, though Emma seemed annoyed.

“Ugh, you really don’t have to...”

“I’m coming. It’s my mission to be happy with Mr. Noir.”

“Hrmph.”

“Oh, Ms. Emma, were you going to go look for a pig or something?”

“Excuse me?!”

Luna sighed as the two of them bickered and asked how I planned on looking for the bird.

“I was thinking I’d ask the Great Sage,” I told her.

“You can do that? Your skills truly are useful, Sir Noir.”

I hadn’t been able to use it last year because of the headaches, but I’d gotten a pretty good handle on them now, so I asked without hesitation.

<It is currently flying over a location 773 yards to the east.> That wasn’t very far at all!

“Enough fighting, you two. I know where it is, so let’s get going!”

It was on the move, so if we didn’t hurry, it might get away. The four of us dashed out of the guild and sprinted through town. Soon enough, we found a bird exactly where the sage said it’d be.

“That bird that just passed overhead was the smile bird, right?”

“I think so.”

I could hear the other townspeople talking as we followed it.

“Huh? Isn’t that it?” Luna pointed straight ahead.

A crowd of people were looking up into the sky at a bird. It looked like a

falcon with short wings, but of a completely different color than any bird of prey I knew. Its body was a blue, a little deeper than the sky, and its beak a cheery gold.

I used my Discerning Eye on it.

Name: Guffaw

Level: 12

Skills: High-Speed Flight; Laughter Beam

“Yup, I think that’s the smile bird.”

“We should get over there.”

When we worked our way into the ring of people, it was immediately apparent that something was a little odd. They were all roaring with strange laughter. I didn’t know what they were laughing about, but they were all cackling uncontrollably and talking about all sorts of incomprehensible nonsense.

“Hey, the sign fell over! Isn’t that hilarious?!”

“Look at that person walking over there! Isn’t that funny? Ah ha ha ha ha!”

They were taking profound delight in extremely everyday occurrences. Was this the smile bird’s power? But no one struck me as particularly *happy*. If anything, it just seemed like they’d lost some IQ points. A blue beam of light fired from the Guffaw’s eyes and made everyone laugh even harder.

“Make me happy, smile bird!”

“Hey, that’s cheating! Do me!”

It seemed to respond to requests, because the Guffaw instantly hit Lola and Emma with its beam. The way their attitudes suddenly changed was a little scary.

“Look, everyone, that building...is square!”

“It really is! And it’s got a door! How ridiculous! Ah ha ha ha ha!”

I didn't really understand what was so funny.

"I guess that might be some people's definition of happy, but I don't want that to happen to me," said Luna.

"You and me both," I agreed.

"That said, it's really not what I imagined it'd be. I thought it'd be a much gentler, quieter kind of happineeeeeeeee—"

"Luna?"

Luna had been hit with the Laughter Beam. Even someone as cool and collected as her couldn't fight it.

"Sir Noir! Sir Noir! Look what I can do!" she proudly announced before doing a handstand. "It's a handstand! Ah ha ha ha!"

What a terrifying skill. All I could see it as was a drastic personality change, so I read its description with Editor.

Laughter Beam: Temporarily reduces target's intellect, thinking ability, and shame. Improves target's mood and makes them think everything is funny.

See! I knew it made you stupid! I didn't care how happy it made me, I didn't want that. But just as I'd feared, I was hit with the beam. I didn't even have a chance to avoid it. The second it hit, I felt something burst inside me.

I tore off my shirt and stood in front of everyone. "Look at me, everybody! I'm about to perform the famous Stardia Family Octopus Dance. Wiggle wiggle wiggle!"

I put on a presentation that would have met my father's most drunken standard. It was fun! And it felt good when everyone burst out laughing. What an amazing feeling! Thank you, Guffaw!

I ended up performing the Octopus Dance for nearly an hour. The crowd got sucked in by my energy and started copying me, and before long the whole

square was full of bizarre dancing.

Suddenly, I snapped out of it and found I was half-naked. Emma and the others seemed to snap out of it at the same time. The Guffaw was nowhere to be seen. Once the trance wore off, it was clear that it had all been a result of the bird's skill.

Emma watched the bird fly off with a dazed look in her eye. "We sure got into that, huh...?"

"Yeah. And I did that dance my dad always does, even though I swore I never would."

"It's weird though, don't you feel kinda refreshed?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it."

Something about spending all that time laughing like idiots had relaxed our bodies and minds. It had worked on Luna and the others too.

"The smile bird, huh?" she said. "It doesn't attack people, either. What a strange monster."

"It's definitely not a bad monster, that's for sure," I said. "We humans can't fly. We're restricted by so many things. And not just physically, but by things like society's rules. That bird gave us a way to escape all that, if just for a moment. I think we could learn a thing or two from it."

I was being serious, but Lola started giggling. "I guess being forced to learn a lesson isn't always terrible."

"Look, if I don't try to frame it like that, I'll be crushed by the shame of knowing I did the Octopus Dance!"

But it really was a fun day. The Guffaw had moved on from us to other spots in the town, so laughter continued to echo through town all day.

I look forward to seeing you again next year, Guffaw!



Afterword

HELLO AGAIN, Meguru Seto here. Thank you for picking up this book. I know it was pretty sudden, but now that I think about it, I really have published a lot of books this year. I'm actually kind of shocked that it's already December...time moves too fast! Looking back on this year, there were some rough spots, but it wasn't a bad year overall. How did it go for you? I'd love to hear all about it. It's going to keep getting colder, so take care not to catch a cold.

I feel like, given the season, I should probably talk about my goals for next year. I hope to make it even better than this one! I know that's kind of a stupid answer, but that's how I feel. As an author, I hope to produce interesting work, but I'm also aiming to write even more. I should probably thank people now.

To Takehana Note, your incredible illustrations had me bursting with excitement again. The girls were especially cute, and you totally nailed Dory. To my editor Shou Ji, you did so much for me again this time. And I want to say a big thank you for everyone involved in publishing this series.

And lastly, to all my readers, I look forward to seeing you again soon.

The Hidden Dungeon
Only I Can Enter



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